

Alexi McCammond Interview Transcript

Steve Phillips [00:00:14] Welcome to Democracy in Color with Steve Phillips a Color Conscious podcast about politics. I'm your host, Steve Phillips, and my uncle Arenzia Cochran was one of the first black journalists to cover the White House back in the 1950s working for the Washington Star. I remember telling you about his actually two racists and that when he would sit down to lunch, the reporters would get up and walk away. So he wound up leaving, starting his own paper, the black paper, Niagara Falls Patriot. But he helped to nurture my love of writing and my interest in journalism. And that interest led me to get a job with the Cleveland Plain Dealer, the largest paper in Cleveland, where I was a copy boy. And this was back in the day. And so the reporters would sit at their desk, at their typewriters. Young people Google what that is, typed their stories up, pulled a piece of paper out of the typewriter, bring it over to me. I would put into a pneumatic tube and shoot that upstairs to where it would be physically laid out for the newspaper. Two years later, I got an internship at the Plain Dealer on the editorial board where I got the paper. We would talk about the weekly events was going out in the world. I got the paper to take the then radical step of urging the United States government to talk to the African National Congress. In 1985, Nelson Mandela was still in prison. I share that history to highlight just how much the media business has changed over the past few decades. And so today we're going to talk about what those changes mean in terms of the obstacles and opportunities for people of color in general and for building a multiracial democracy in particular. And for that conversation, delighted to be joined by a guest who is squarely in the middle of these swirling changes that are taking place in the media and communications landscape. And joining me for the conversations, my co-host, Sharline Chiang, was also a journalism O.G. from back in the day. Sharline, how are you? And you want to induce our guests?

Sharline Chiang [00:02:01] Yes, I'm doing great. And definitely an O.G.. And how O is the O, the O is so O, that. I think back to when I was in high school. I was the editor of a high school newspaper, and we would run the text through a machine that put wax on the back of one piece of paper. Then you would cut out the piece of paper and then stick it under another piece of paper. And then you maybe go through another machine that that is it would make copies of it. And that is was the called the piece step. And that was how we put out our school paper and I was in a bunch of newsrooms, didn't have to do anything on a typewriter so not that oh, but oh, enough that we had no internet and no cell phones and yeah, that is how I did actually. But I think almost the majority of my journalism newspaper career or maybe have have, you know, Internet web, but half of it was without. So I am thrilled today to be talking to a fellow journalist, I guess today is Alexi McCammond. Alexi is a political journalist. She's an opinion editor at The Washington Post and has served as an NBC and MSNBC contributor. She was also contributor for PBS's As Washington Week. And prior to joining The Washington Post, she was a national political reporter four years at Axios. In 2020, Alexi appeared on Forbes 30 under 30 list. As you can do the math, she is a young, budding and credible journalist in this new age of journalism, and I cannot wait to talk to her and get her thoughts on how things have changed. And she's probably just like, I can't believe how, Oh, you guys are from journalism. Stories of how news used to get produced. We used to had tablets, Alexi We had tablets and then we would chip away and big headline into the clay.

Alexi McCammond [00:03:52] The only tablet I know now is my iPad. So thank you. I'm like, even that feeling all these days, you know, I worked on my high school newspaper and that's probably the closest I have to your experience, I would have to say, like during lunch or after class and, you know, was designing the pages and had to make sure we

were meeting the deadline. So get to the printer on time so we could have the physical paper for publication. And stressing about that in high school was not always fun. And I love that I'm at the post now and I don't have to think about inches or column space. Luckily other people deal with the paper side for opinion, but that's the last time I had to deal with the printing press column.

Steve Phillips [00:04:41] Inches are not a big part of the Instagram era.

Alexi McCammond [00:04:43] So no, I used to also like cold call local businesses trying to sell ads to get the paper in circulation. It was it was a good experience. I really loved doing it. But it's I don't care about that now. Yes, totally. Totally. I mean, my sister is only two years younger and I can't even get her to pick up the phone for me. You know, it's like they didn't want to talk on the phone. Yeah, well, thank you guys for having me. I'm so happy to see you.

Steve Phillips [00:05:12] Thanks for being.

Alexi McCammond [00:05:12] Here.

Sharline Chiang [00:05:13] We're so thrilled to have you here. We're going to get into it, Alexi. You don't know where I live. Going back down memory lane. You've told us you are your high school newspaper editor. We were interested in asking you, as you were a sociology major, actually, at University of Chicago. And you did well when you were there, right? For an undergraduate political publication was called The Gate. But apparently, our research shows that you originally wanted to be a doctor. And is that accurate? And just kind of curious. So where where like, how did that journey go that you went for, first of all, like, how did you start from wanting to be a doctor and then going into sociology and then getting into journalism and media?

Alexi McCammond [00:05:56] Yeah, Thank you for the question. Good research team. I'm always afraid of like how much exists about me on the internet. But then I laugh when it's wrong and it says I'm like 63 and worth like \$2 trillion. And I'm like, Well, I've only a bad.

Sharline Chiang [00:06:10] Good problem to have. Yeah.

Alexi McCammond [00:06:13] And so when I was I grew up in the Midwest. I'm from Rockford, Illinois, which is pretty northwest from Chicago. And I was the first in my family to go to college. I'm the middle of three. And I always you know, I'm a big animal person and I'm a big people person. And I've always wanted to help people and be in situations where I could talk to them and understand their problems and then work toward solutions. I, from a young age was like, Well, obviously that means being a doctor. And my parents, bless their hearts, being from the Midwest, having not gone to college themselves. They were like, Yes, absolutely do that and do not think of anything else. You'll make enough money to take care of us someday. Like, that's the right career path. Do that. So I loved external validation from a young age, and that kept me going for a long time to the point where I wasn't even really allowing myself to consider doing something like journalism as a viable career option. Even though I was fully I was telling a friend about this the other day, my sister and I would make these little home movies. They were like sketch shows essentially. And I always made sure there was like a news segment in there. And so I would be doing little standups, like in my bedroom, you know, talking about like, I don't know, the weather in Rockford and like, what's going on at home. And I would make little

scenes and pass them out to my family members and was always loving writing and reading and watching the news and having discussions. But, you know, frankly, we were like a lower kind of middle class family in the Midwest. We lived paycheck to paycheck for a really long time. And my understanding of a job was a very transactional thing that I was to do to make money. So I was like, I'll never make money writing for a newspaper. Who knows where, though they will be? Once I graduated college in 2015, you know, people weren't really sure where media was going, but when I got to college, I was so lucky to be at the University of Chicago. It was a huge culture shock for many reasons. I had only gone to public schools before that, and those experiences alone were totally different. But I got there and I had to have a real come to Jesus moment with myself because I started taking these classes like, you know, organic chemistry and these like advanced biology classes. And I love learning for the sake of learning. So school is like totally my jam. But I got to a point where I was like, Lexi, like, you're kind of unhappy in these classes. I couldn't really see the fully formed life that I wanted down the road like a partner and, you know, being able to travel and having interests outside of work, I just I didn't I couldn't see that with the path that I was following. And I was like, Well, what do you actually like doing? What have you actually always enjoyed writing, reading, media consumption. And so I had to just sit with myself and say, like, Look, I know this is really scary. You're Chicago doesn't even have a journalism program. So it was like, Well, what am I going to study if it's not so clear? And I just called my parents one day and was like, Listen, I'm switching my major to sociology and I'm going to pursue being a reporter. And this is what I really want to do. And they were, you know, a little confused at first and eventually supportive. Their initial reaction was like, you're going to make no money. And I was kind of like, I'm just I have to believe in myself. Like, this is what I want to do and I will be successful if I'm so passionate about it. And sociology was a matter of talking to friends and being sort of like, What do you guys think I'm interested in? Like, what have you taken classes in that you think I would vibe with? And sociology was so perfect for me. I mean, like, we got to do, like, the most random things. We were assigned to take the bus and the train up and down and around Chicago and be little ethnographers and just take notes on people that you notice and trends and places that you call all the time that you wouldn't have seen otherwise. And at the core of it all, as I said at the start, it was about wanting to know other people's problems or hopes and dreams, you know, and ideas and where I could fit into either helping them solve an issue or bring something to life. And I love learning about the squishy parts of what makes us who we are. And sociology is a huge part of that. And I think that it's helped me view sort of what I do from a different lens than I would have if I had done a traditional journalism program for four years. But it was great, and I feel like I look back now and in the moment I couldn't see sort of everything lining up to what it has now. But it was also perfect for me and I wouldn't do anything over. I mean, maybe I'd like not take the chemistry classes in the first quarter.

Steve Phillips [00:11:16] It's so fascinating that we you know, you and I have talked some, you know, before, but not about this. And so I went to college thinking I was going to be a doctor until I took organic chemistry. And then that was a similar type of piece. And so I realized I was like, I wouldn't mind being a doctor, but I didn't want to become a doctor. Fears of going through all of that. So that's very fascinating, weeding out realities. So in terms of these changes, you mentioned that things were, you know, certain when you're in high school and in college. And so the question has to do with what you've seen in terms of the technology and how this technological developments have impacted journalism and writing and communications. Right. And so you worked for six years at Axios, Right. Which is a very kind of new media, techie media startup. And then now you're at Bezos's is Washington Post, which is both the epitome of legacy newspaper. And then in terms of certainly in terms of Washington, D.C., I love all the President's Men and

the whole Watergate hearings and whatnot and all of that. But now you have Bezos, the Amazon guys trying to bring, you know, new, you're doing Washington Post live that didn't used to be part of what the dynamic was there. So how do you think about these changes in technology and how they've affected journalism, both everything from research to distribution and platforms, etc.?

Alexi McCammond [00:12:43] It's a great question and something we definitely have to think about all the time at the post in a way that obviously we were at Axios, but it was baked into our DNA because we were a startup at Axios. When what I've learned is, you know, when you work at a place that is a legacy newsroom, change is scary. And frankly, nobody knows kind of what people want. And I think when you get into these rooms where smartest minds in media are thinking about different ways to deliver journalism, given these new technologies and platforms, there's a tendency to almost forget that, like we're humans ourselves, you know, like I'm I will often ask people like, well, no, we think about how you consume content, Think about, like what you do. You're not reading 16 articles about the new House speaker. You might read one or two from The Washington Post, but that's not the only thing you want to read. You're not typing washingtonpost.com on your computer and showing up at the home page. Most people come to us from social media, which is changing, declining rapidly from a search engine like Google, and that's also a game that you have to play or from organic sharing, from friends and things like that. And so we really have to think about how people are actually behaving. Not only what do we think they want to read, it's a lot about meeting them where they are. And because media is so fractured now, that's harder than ever. The type of news and content that people want on TikTok, which they do want news is wildly different than the way that we would present it in a column or a news article. It also has implications for the business side because Tik-tok exists in its own platform and does not link to the website in any way. So that doesn't generate traffic. It's harder to monetize. TikTok obviously controls the ads on their platform and so you have to constantly weigh what is sort of worth investing in when you aren't getting those same returns on investment that we're used to in media. And that especially legacy media folks really kind of depend on traffic, traditional ads, you know, sponsors for newsletters or Washington Post live events. And so a lot of the conversations I think we've been having lately is how to especially when social media is declining, I would say, and not the best hub to find news. How do you give someone a product that is because of what I do in the Post political in nature, but brings together all the best parts and experiences from these platforms in a way that feels familiar but unique and new. And so I'm always trying to look at places like Reddit or TikTok or YouTube shorts and and gather. It's almost reporting sort of what are people talking about on these apps? How are they talking about and feeling about things like the presidential election? And how can we bring that to our audience who probably subscribe to the paper more often than not and are older than the people who are on TikTok, but might have those same opinions or want to learn what's going on. And so that's what I've noticed lately, not just with us, but other places, trying to not be everything to everyone, but to fill this void that we're seeing where there isn't one clear social platform that's dominating, like Facebook used to, like Twitter used to like people thought Threads might but isn't. Instagram's also really hard, doesn't link back to the website. It stays in the app. And so I think one of the biggest changes is really the business consideration because that changes what you write, where you're putting it, who's writing it, how often you're doing it. And I think it's difficult for folks who have been doing this for a long time to immediately see the benefits of investing in those platforms, taking risks, doing things that are not anything like traditional journalism, divorcing yourself from the pain of, okay, this isn't going to make us money in the way that we know how, but we have enough smart people to get ahead of different ways to make money from this platform, knowing what we know and being able to make educated

guesses. The last thing I would say is that across the board media now reflects, I think, a lot of what people are talking about on Twitter, for better or for worse. And I think that can sometimes limit our discussions, like I was saying earlier about, you know, like the new House speaker or something like that, I'll get out and do focus groups and it's like nobody even knows who this man is and they don't care. And that doesn't mean that they're bad or misinformed or, you know, shouldn't be like voting. It means we need to be doing things entirely differently. Because when you're working at TV, you're listening to radio, you're you're reading things online. It's the same conversations over and over and over again. And people want different content and they want to consume it in ways that are much more engaging. People love subtitles and captions. They like quick videos. They like sound. Attention spans are shorter than ever. That also really changes what we write, how you write it, how you present it. And those are those are again, changes that are hard for someone who is my age, let alone folks who have been doing it for decades and have to sort of get used to this idea of, okay, now we're writing for a different audience and it might not make us money in the way we think, but it will open doors to something new.

Steve Phillips [00:18:30] You know, it's so fascinating to hear you talk about gathering this information. These are from different places and so you don't read it. And ticktock, I guess the theme of this part is going to be the OG piece. But it's relevant, I think, in terms of how media was shaped and our public opinion was shaped in this country. So when I was on the editorial board of the Cleveland Plain Dealer, you would come in and you would get the dead tree copies of The New York Times and The Plain Dealer, and you sit down and read those, and then we'd have a meeting to talk about the news of the day. First of all, all these like like this is a job. You read about the news and talk about your opinions about it. And so that was like really drawn to that because of my own trajectory. But that was the extent of what the information gathering it was, what was in the Times. It maybe it was in your local paper and then you that shaped what the whole paper would actually be doing.

Alexi McCammond [00:19:15] And it's so different now and I'm so grateful for that. And what's most interesting is that data that our next gen team, next generation team has collected, they focus on audiences that are like 18 to 32 and how they behave and interact with us. And apparently our data shows that that demo is actually really interested in multiple perspectives and are turned off almost from clear or extreme biases. So like they might look something up on The Washington Post and then go to see what and whether Fox News has written about the same thing. And that is something that I've seen happening in real time. On Tik Tok, which has been the most fascinating. These kids are having live political debates and they are cordial and they are civil and they are thoughtful and they literally, because it's up an app on your phone, bring together people who are living in Palestine who are living in New York City, who are coming from Kansas City and and and white moms sitting in their kitchen literally being like, I'm just here to listen. Like it is among the more fascinating trends I've seen happen lately, because it flies in the face of what I think we probably all think, which is changing rapidly, which is like the Internet is this cesspool, polarized place and no...

Sharline Chiang [00:20:38] End of everything. Yeah.

Alexi McCammond [00:20:40] Yes. And like, nobody wants to talk to each other and nobody's talking to each other. It's like actually the younger generation and the folks who are on Tik-tok who aren't even necessarily always younger, they're interested in engaging with things they don't agree with. They're interested in kind of pushing the envelope in a way that is open to hearing other people do the same. The biggest example I've seen of

this lately, and then I've talked to my editors about is that it really feels like the country is not ready properly for a third party. But at the same time, it truly feels like it's the first time that a sizable amount of folks are just done with the two party system. And I think a big part of that is the group of people who have turned 18 recently or are turning 18 ahead of this new election or are older than 18, maybe haven't voted and would be for the first time. I see these conversations on Reddit, on Twitter, on TikTok, on Instagram, where people are like, I remember my parents sitting down after 9/11 and being like, Well, we don't really have any good alternatives to George Bush, so I guess our hands are tied. You know, lesser of two evils situation. And they're like, We're done. We're done doing that. We don't have to turn into our parents overnight. We can think about ways to primary the sitting president. We can think about ways to get ahead of a situation where we're stuck with a lesser of two evils. But until we have that solution, we don't need to support one or the other because that party loyalty and identification just isn't there. And that's really clear on social. Even with the most liberal folks, they they do not care if you have a D next to your name unless you prove that you share the same moral compass as them. And that's a huge change that I don't think many folks in media are picking up on, but especially I think in politics and on political campaigns. On the Left.

Steve Phillips [00:22:35] You're teasing up our next podcast guest after you is going to be Morris Mitchell of the Working Families Party, who's trying to build a third political force within this country. So we will we will ask him about what you have so.

Alexi McCammond [00:22:48] Yes.

Steve Phillips [00:22:49] Flagged here.

Alexi McCammond [00:22:50] So, yes, that's great. I mean, and I think the currents are there. I mean, you guys see it, too. There are at least four people now running, I think, as independents or Green Party candidates. The third party ticket against Biden. Folks want an alternative. They want choices. You know, it seems simple enough. People just want choices and they don't like feeling like they don't have them. And they definitely don't like feeling like they're being told what to do. And so I think these alternative movements are real. It's just a matter of can you build a proper third party during a presidential election cycle? I don't know. We'll find out next to tune in to the next episode.

Sharline Chiang [00:23:34] Alexi, I was so intrigued by hearing you say how you go to somewhat what are alternative sources to, to gather information or to check out, you know, take the temperature of or check the pulse through other platforms like Reddit, and that you will go back to your editors and say, this is what I was hearing, right, like, this is kind of what I'm seeing. How do you view your role or your experience so far in the at the intersection of that, your journalism career so far? And as a young woman of color, someone of your generation, but also from your particular lived experience and everything from your family background to even you were talking about your class background. Yeah. In this ongoing, rapidly changing landscape of news and media where you do have these sort of intergenerational multi-generations in the newsroom.

Alexi McCammond [00:24:26] Yeah, it's a great question.

Sharline Chiang [00:24:27] And races, right?

Alexi McCammond [00:24:30] Yeah, I feel like I mean you guys know, media and newsrooms for a long time have been like, we're committed to DEI and we're going to

make it more diverse – X, Y, Z. And then like, you know, you see the newsrooms and they look the same and it's like, well, how is this happening? You know? And like, I know how it's happening. Look like I'm in it because I've been in it and in different parts of it. And it's like shocking, you know, how people can say one thing and then it's like, well, you're doing the complete opposite. So no wonder the result.

Steve Phillips [00:25:02] We know.

Alexi McCammond [00:25:02] Out there. Right. This is the first time, though, that, like, it truly feels different. Like I've never had more people come up to me than I have in my short time at The Post. Like literally being like, We don't know anything. You tell us what we don't know. Tell us what we're not doing. Tell us what we're not seeing. And that could be.

Sharline Chiang [00:25:25] Great.

Alexi McCammond [00:25:26] You know, you might think it could be another situation where they're saying something but don't actually want it. It's everyone from like the head of Comms to the head of opinion to like the CEO. Like literally everyone is like looking to me and other folks in my similar position being like, guys, what are we getting wrong? What do you all know? Because clearly what we know and are trying isn't working. And it's and and what is also remarkable, I've heard it at least three times and the new CEO just said it himself. And I was shocked to hear him say this in front of, you know, it all company meeting. They keep being like people think The Washington Post is just a bunch of old white guys sitting around making this paper and like, yeah, we cannot allow that to keep happening. We cannot allow that to be the perception because it's not, right. And I'm like, okay, well, you know, I don't know that that perception just started like today, but it's good, good to start acknowledging it and good to be to put your ego aside. I think for a long time, editors and newsroom leaders were kind of like feeling like if we talked about it, we were pushing them out and that's not the case we need to bring...there is so much I don't know, people talk about like Bush era tax cuts. And I'm like, guys, I was sitting in my parent's kitchen like they were still making me dinner at that point in my life, like I was in elementary school, like, please teach me these things and and vice versa. And there are also stories that simply won't be brought up or told. There are perspectives that that won't be told or considered. I'll I guess I'll think of an idea from the Taylor Swift, Travis Kelsey news cycle and someone in an editorial meeting had proposed and it was totally in good faith, an idea, a column sort of around like welcoming this new cohort of Swifties to the NFL and like not explaining football to them. But that's how the idea came off. And luckily, one of my colleagues who's a woman like raised her hand and was like, you know, listen, I think it's a noble idea, but it's very easy to write this as like a mansplaining. "Hey, girls, like, let me tell you about sports," when like actually a lot of women do watch football and know sports and know what's going on. And even if they don't, doesn't mean they're asking you for an explainer on how football works just because they like Taylor Swift. And I don't think that idea actually came to fruition because of conversations like that. And, you know, I think what I've talked to Steve about this before, it's someone likened it to being chased by wolves, essentially. Like if you are a young person of color in a newsroom and you see something or read something that you're like, oh, that's not right or that sounds kind of racist or like, people wouldn't wouldn't talk like this. If you don't say something, you're in the live by those wolves that are chasing you. And if you do say something, you're being eaten alive afterwards, thinking, did I say the right thing to step out of turn? Was I supposed to even bring that up? And that's something I have to get over time and again. But they are so receptive to hearing things like that and actually making changes. So it's

made that a lot easier over time. But I am so heartened that they're like, look, you know, a lot more than we do. So let's collaborate.

Steve Phillips [00:28:54] Just real quick for the audience members who may not be sports fans. Travis Kelsey, a pro football player for the Kansas City Chiefs, who's dating Taylor Swift, who I think most people know. And what I don't know about Travis Kelsey is that he's from Cleveland Heights, Ohio, which is where I am from. And he went to Heights High, where my brother Jeff went to high school.

Sharline Chiang [00:29:14] All things connected.

Alexi McCammond [00:29:15] Your brother could have been dating Taylor Swift left in another life.

Sharline Chiang [00:29:19] Yeah, that would be something else. Alexi. What...you were talking about some platforms. I'm. I'm pretty intrigued and just curious. So what are some platforms that you will regularly check out as a journalist that you're drawn to that you look to glean conversations from and trends from beyond just looking at all the other news sites.

Alexi McCammond [00:29:50] A lot of it these days comes from like individual creators or like I hesitate to say influencers, but those trusted voices you can go to, whether it's on Instagram or TikTok or Reddit and see sort of what's going on, too weird things I've been doing weird to come up with ideas at The Post. One. I've literally just been going through the comments sections of different articles and looking at those debates that people are having because there are often bits and pieces and angles that I'm like, "Oh, this is what they want to know about," or "This is what they're tussling over. And we haven't addressed that" or "this is a good follow up story idea based on what people are actually talking about." And that's the greatest use of social media, obviously, is just like going to this place where there's endless spaces where you can find conversations. And Reddit is a really good place for that too. There are these, you know, general subreddits that are just like where you can ask questions and those often warrant some of the more interesting ideas. There was one recently that was like a general question about what are some things in life that have quietly gone away and people said some, you know, obvious examples like, I don't know, like CDs or cassette tapes and things like that, right? Like physical things. But then someone wrote an answer that was ownership and the concept of ownership and how we rent everything you can. You rent, you rent movies and music and streaming services, You rent cars. Why I own a car when you can Uber people can't afford homes, so they're renting. You can rent furniture, you can rent clothes, you can rent designer handbags. Like there is this world in which we have come to kind of distance ourselves from ownership and the idea of ownership. And at first that conversation was only about housing and housing affordability. And you know, this big problem with if you couldn't own a home, then like you should feel some sort of shame. And that's an issue to now it's like, actually, guys, we rent so many different things and we've made this quiet transition to a place where we should be having a more holistic conversation about what that means personally for the way we socialize for the economy. And that was just something I came across and I was like, I would have never thought of that on my own, you know? So those are always helpful and fun.

Steve Phillips [00:32:24] I went to see this. I kind of my new thing is you're going to stand up comedy. And this comedian had a whole thing about these things that have

disappeared. And he was talking about like CDs and going to like Tower Records. Then he's like...

Sharline Chiang [00:32:37] Oh, Tower Records.

Steve Phillips [00:32:38] And then they ran out. Can you imagine running out of music now? Can you go to Spotify? I ran out of music? So that was just interesting in that regard. But I wanna ask you about this, the reading, the comments thing. And so I also want to thank you for the partnership we had around getting a piece published in the and The Post. And so we did this piece on the California's political leaders not really being serious about, sufficiently serious of getting a black woman into the Senate seat. And Gavin Newsom had said that that was important. And then he's kind of, I would argue, doing the, you know, appeasement moves or whatnot. So anyway, it's a racially explicit piece around this. And so there were 1600 comments to that piece, I believe. And so I for my mental health, don't read the comments. I did task Sharline with reading some of them.

Sharline Chiang [00:33:31] Yeah, I did.

Steve Phillips [00:33:32] But I think the more serious question is, is it what's in there? Right? Is it just like vitriol and I'm the real racist and blah blah, or is that you finding some actual real nuggets of stuff to work with and whatnot?

Alexi McCammond [00:33:46] You have to sort through the the bad stuff to find the good stuff, you know, And like when there are people who are just going back and forth with each other, which is usually what it turns into, they start out fighting against you or your concept, and then they end up fighting with each other and it's like, okay, well this is great. You guys are just angry and like, need a therapist. So there's a lot, there's a lot of, of, of feelings involved. And obviously people are more likely to write when they're angry. That said, I think The Post readership is like pretty thoughtful across the board. I am so happy that you wrote that piece for so many reasons. We are starting a politics opinion newsletter in January and I'll be writing it and over the last several weeks we've been kind of prototyping it, starting it from scratch. And I'm not kidding, Steve, We hadn't even talked about your idea and it was like my first prototype for the newsletter, and I wrote it. The same idea that you did yours was Light Years Better and smarter than mine, but it was the same idea, and I remember feeling nervous writing it and submitting it because I was like, "Oh my God, are they going to think that I'm like a black woman who's like, who's like these other candidates...".

Sharline Chiang [00:35:03] Angry black womem?

Alexi McCammond [00:35:04] Well, yes. Yeah. And I and it was literally like Newsom says X Democrats say Y he just did this. It's like window dressing, window dressing, window dressing. And like, this is like a bigger problem for the Democratic Party, whatever. And I was so nervous because I was like, do I have the authority to say this? And then I was like, Yes. I have been covering politics in the Democratic Party for long enough, number one. Number two, like, we are not stupid and I'm not going to gaslight myself like we all can see why, especially then, particularly with people of color, like what is happening versus what is being said. And I think honestly, like the Biden Harris relationship has put that into starker contrast for a lot of people of color, a lot of black folks with respect to the Democratic Party and what they're saying versus what they're doing. And that situation for Newsom, I was so annoyed that so many white Democrats rushed to the Internet to get ahead of the narrative and to steer it in the direction of like, "Oh my God,

yeah, he's the best. Look at what he did, keeping his promise." And it's like, guys, do not be so shortsighted like, think about the big picture. And when you submitted that, I was like, This is a sign from the universe. And it was, again, so much smarter than what I had written and actually something we could publish. But frankly, it did take a little convincing because there is an immediate reaction, as I was mentioning earlier, where I think it's like your ego is involved, where it's like, well, who are we to say that those white candidates aren't qualified or like, shouldn't have done? I'm like, No, no, we're not saying they're not qualified. You need to read this and put your ego aside and be clinical about what we are saying because we are being clinical and just because we're black and we're saying it doesn't mean we're not. And I'm so happy that you published this and you wrote this because it's almost like you're hurting someone's feelings if you suggest that someone should step aside and support a woman of color when it's like you guys have been saying this for how long? And like you, Steve Phillips is the one proposing this idea, not the DNC, not the DSCCC, not Joe Biden, like Steve Phillips. Thank you. But but yeah, I mean, it's really important to put it out there. And I think honestly, I think more comments better, right. Because people are engaging with something even if they disagree with it. It's like they're talking to other people about it. It gets people thinking like, I think it's it's for the best.

Steve Phillips [00:37:36] Well, it's an interesting illustration, as you are even describing that kind of like peeling back the curtain to a certain extent. Right. That it takes kind of both. And it's actually, you know, you need somebody on the inside who can actually have those conversations and navigate that process and help people grapple with the things they're facing. And then sometimes it doesn't hurt to have an O.G. who knows Gavin Newsom for 25 years who could actually say, no, this is what the situation is, so.

Alexi McCammond [00:38:07] Yes, I think that's a big part of it. Yes, me too. And, you know, all of the op ed that I've solicited externally, with the exception of Newt Gingrich, have been people of color or women. And it's like, I don't even think like, oh, I need to find a woman or a person of color. Like, I'm just like, oh, I know this person who would be great to write this. Or like from working in the past and covering like different grassroots movements and things through elections. I know so many different types of folks that, you know, a lot of the editors just by way of not reporting recently don't know. And that's been a huge advantage, just truly bringing different voices. And those pieces do very well. They get a lot of traffic and people read them. And, you know, it's smart. They're smart folks.

Steve Phillips [00:38:54] I was once on a cross-country flight with or I sat next to Callista Gingrich and get Newt's wife, actually. And then she will pay for the full wi fi for the whole flight. So we kept running out and then she would turn and talk to me. And as you know, there's a stereotype about all black people know each other. And then this was the time when Newt was doing a show with Van Jones, and then she's like, Oh, well, do you know Van Jones? I'm like, Actually, I do know Van Jones, I guess we all do, I don't know. So.

Alexi McCammond [00:39:24] Oh, I can't even imagine that.

Steve Phillips [00:39:26] Oh, I know. She was quite lovely, actually.

Alexi McCammond [00:39:28] Oh, they're very, very like silly and cute on Instagram. She's always posting selfies of them, like from the golf course and like they're like these incredible filters and it's just like they look very earnest know.

Steve Phillips [00:39:41] So I want to play a little bit of a serious talk about you're talking a little about the role of being an opinion editor. And so your career that has been as a writer. And so both, how is it different than also why did you make that switch? And then what are you hoping to accomplish by taking on this different type of a role?

Alexi McCammond [00:39:55] One thing that people outside of media don't usually know is editor is I mean, titles I think are stupid across the board. But Editor, you're like a lot of editors are also writers. And I'll be starting this newsletter, as I said, and hoping to publish my first column soon actually about RFK Jr and black voters and his anti-vaccine rhetoric and his medical racism documentary and these ways in which it's not just what he's saying, it's who he's trying to appeal to when he's saying these things. And the last poll I saw, it was either the Times poll or a morning consult poll from last week. He had 28% of support from black voters. Biden had 50. Trump had 13 in a three way matchup, 28%. That's I mean, that's wild. And especially when people only think that RFK would take from Trump, there is evidence to suggest that he'd take from Biden and Trump equally. And you dig down and it goes back to what we were saying anyway. So that's all to say. We'll be doing both writing and editing. I love editing. It's kind of like doing a puzzle and like moving things around to tell the best story, thinking about the reader and their experience and what you want them to feel. I like working with writers. I think reading other people makes you a better writer, and that's a big part of why I want to do it. It's also a great leadership position and an opportunity I didn't from where I was before and like it's crazy to me that I get to be in rooms and make decisions that I do because it does come with a lot of authority and responsibility. But that's a big part of the appeal that that came up in the interview process too, is they were like, We want someone who is ready to do things differently, who can bring a different perspective. And I think both being a reporter and coming from start ups, I just thought of our opinions and editorials differently. I go back and forth between being like, I want to have a TV show, I want to write books, I want to run a newsroom some day. But it all goes back to, I think, that original kind of like driving force, which is like, I just love connecting with people. I love knowing like what hurts them, what makes them excited, what they want, what they're scared of, and like how to insert myself, whether by helping bring it to life or just like sharing a narrative that could benefit other people either in the way they feel or the way they make decisions.

Sharline Chiang [00:42:24] I'll just here for all the things that you name that you said, I don't know if I want to show or you know, this or that. I could just imagine you doing all of it. And it's exciting to see you on this path and see, you know, we've been following, you know, your career actually a bit, and we're just really excited for you and to see you in this new role and looking forward to your newsletter. That sounds awesome.

Alexi McCammond [00:42:46] Thank you. I feels good. It feels like I'm in the right spot, you know? And I've tried to be someone who, like, adheres to the idea that life is non-linear. And that's especially true and can be with your career. And so I've always kept the door open to considering things that seem not directly related to what I've always done. And I'm very grateful for that sort of like ability to be nimble and to pivot. Because even like with sociology, it like made me think in ways I wouldn't have otherwise. And it was so beneficial.

Steve Phillips [00:43:17] But not, not medicine, though.

Alexi McCammond [00:43:20] I know there are professionals for that.

Steve Phillips [00:43:24] Yeah, so we're getting towards the end. But you mentioned you're in the newsletter in politics in that you're doing, you know, both you are one and you have some of your hanger on the pulse of the attitudes of young people and their views and whatnot. So as you look at 2024, what do you see? What are you going to be looking for? Do you have any like predictions of how it's going to play itself out?

Alexi McCammond [00:43:46] Yeah, it's never been more over. It's so over now. I'm trying not to be too negative, but I genuinely, I genuinely think what I said earlier is true, that there is now a sizable amount of people in the country who are done with the two party system, don't feel that they owe Democrats anything, feel that they helped Democrats keep Trump out in 2020. And now that now Democrats owe them to do the same and that they haven't done enough to prevent that from happening. I think people have come to realize that the power of their vote is often oversold. I think it's especially precarious when Republicans across the country are throwing trying to throw votes away, trying to overturn election results in Ohio after Issue 1 passed, which was enshrining abortion rights into their state constitution, Republican state legislators are now trying to block judges from enacting that and saying that instead they will be the sole ones to decide. So it's a mess. I think what I'll be looking for is like whether young people especially are actually getting involved. There have been a bunch of these groups from David Hogg and others to sort of recruit young people to run for state legislatures. And, you know, they're not the most sexy races, they're not the most sexy positions, but they're where these policies are actually happening. And I think that people understand more now than ever that that's where you can affect change, whether joining a body like that or really just sort of lobbying your local lawmakers instead of focusing on Congress. But, you know, I think the Democratic Party is I think they're gaslighting themselves. And I think every day that they say Biden beat Trump once, he's the only one who can do it for that reason is another day they're wasting not finding a solution to keeping. I think some of the most dangerous people out of office. And that's not just Trump, it's down the ballot. And I mean, you know as well as I do that like if Biden wins or loses, they need to figure out what the future of their party looks like, what they stand for, what direction they're moving in. You know, none of that is clear. And and right now all we're hearing about is a bunch of white male governors. So, I mean, that's fine. But if that's the future of the party, then where is that coalition of voters from Barack Obama's time and from Joe Biden's 2020 run that helped you pull off these races like in Georgia as well, that helped you pull off victories you couldn't have otherwise? I mean, it's really hard to turn a non voter into a voter. And the longer that they allow this kind of disdain to fester, well, while not acknowledging it, the longer they will have this universe of people that in the future they'll call swing voters, but they're people who, you know, aren't voting because they feel no sense of reciprocity or, you know, acknowledgment or respect. They don't feel heard. For Republicans, for all the things they do poorly, their faux populism, it works. It makes people feel something. They say it enough times. It's easy to regurgitate if you hear it on Fox News or someone say it at work. And it's a problem. It's a problem. And I think Democrats are really unwilling to look at themselves in the mirror because they're so committed to the idea that they know right from wrong. And I just think that a lot of young people especially see through that.

Steve Phillips [00:47:18] It's not a new issue. 1984, Andy Young was the mayor of Atlanta trying to get Mondale's campaign to continue his campaign to do better and be better. And he says, I'm trying, but there are a bunch of smartass white boys and they don't listen. Right. So this is why I titled the chapter in my first book, Fewer Smart Ass White Boys. So there is that. It's a sober note you paint. I still feel we need to get up every day and pray for Joe Biden's good health. In fact, this battle is already taking place under the radar around what's the future of the party going to be? Who is the leaders going to be? Yes. Are they

going to pop up? You know, the media, not you, of course, are going to be talking about different white male governors, etc.. But I think the landscape is so very different. The opportunities are so different. Personally, I believe that someone like or if not the actual person, Stacey Abrams, I think, could actually speak to the moment in terms of tapping all of those who are not the typical, you know, straight white male model. But...

Alexi McCammond [00:48:19] Yes.

Steve Phillips [00:48:19] I'd like to have more time to have that that fight. Let's play that out through 2028.

Alexi McCammond [00:48:24] So totally, totally. Here's hoping we get some smart folks like her back in the fold. And we don't have people shutting her down because she had the audacity to believe in herself publicly.

Sharline Chiang [00:48:39] You know.

Steve Phillips [00:48:40] We're working on it.

Alexi McCammond [00:48:41] I'm like, I can't even say more. I'll get myself into trouble. I'll get angry.

Sharline Chiang [00:48:46] Alexi, where can people go to follow your work and what you're doing?

Alexi McCammond [00:48:52] Yes, definitely. WashingtonPost.com. Please give us your views and check out the home page in the Opinion Page. The app is great. I wake up every morning and check the app's opinion section. Of course I'm on Twitter, but I really don't use it that much. So you can find me @Alexi but I am rarely posting even articles over there these days.

Steve Phillips [00:49:14] All right.

Alexi McCammond [00:49:14] And you can find me in D.C.

Steve Phillips [00:49:15] Well, right.

Alexi McCammond [00:49:16] You can find me in DC if you're here, but yes, I appreciate you guys for this thoughtful conversation and all that you do and wish we had 3 hours to have it. But next time over drinks and in-person, hopefully.

Steve Phillips [00:49:29] That'd be great. Thank you.

Sharline Chiang [00:49:30] Sounds good. It was great talking to you. Thank you so much.

Steve Phillips [00:49:33] All right. That's all the time we have for today. Enjoyed that conversation. Thank you for listening to Democracy in Color with Steve Phillips. Please help us get the word out about this podcast, subscribing wherever you get your podcasts, sharing with your friends, tweeting @Democracy Color and @SteveP tweets and finding us at Democracy in Color on Instagram or Facebook. You can also keep up with all things DemCo by subscribing to our newsletter at Democracy in Color dot com, you listen to our podcast on iTunes. Please leave us a rating and a comment. It helps others to find our

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