

Can Huffington transform AOL like she has herself?

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In this file photo taken Nov. 29, 2010, Arianna Huffington, author, syndicated columnist and co-founder and editor-in-chief of the "The Huffington Post," poses in Toronto. Internet company AOL Inc. is buying news hub Huffington Post, in an acquisition announced Monday, Feb. 7, 2011 for \$315 million, a deal that represents a bold bet on the future of online news. After the acquisition closes later this year, Arianna Huffington will run AOL's growing array of content, which includes popular technology sites Engadget and TechCrunch, local news sites Patch.com and online mapping service Mapquest. (AP Photo/The Canadian Press, Darren Calabrese, file)

(AP) -- AOL can only hope that Arianna Huffington proves to be as adept at engineering corporate transformations as she has been at

personal ones.

Since she became a prominent public figure as the wife of a multimillionaire running for the U.S. Senate in 1994, Huffington has been both a darling of conservatives and a heroine for liberals.

She disavowed any interest in becoming a political candidate herself during her husband's unsuccessful campaign only to make an aborted run for California governor in 2003. She has been criticized for falling under the influence of self-help gurus and hailed for having the courage to pursue her own convictions.

Along the way, she has been proven she can be both charming and antagonizing - sometimes all within a few minutes of conversation punctuated in her distinctive Greek accent.

"She is a force of nature. It can really be something to watch her in action," said Jeff Jarvis, a City University of New York journalism professor who has gotten to know Huffington while writing a blog about online media. "She is one of those people who will tell you, 'We simply must do this' and will persuade you to do it. She believes she can change the world."

Huffington, 60, could have her biggest pulpit yet at [AOL](#) Inc. It's paying \$315 million to buy her news and opinion site, the [Huffington Post](#), and anointing her as its next best hope to orchestrate a long-awaited turnaround at an Internet company that lost its way a decade ago.

After the deal closes this spring, Huffington will oversee most of AOL's content as the company tries to attract more people and sell more ads. The inventory includes technology sites Engadget and TechCrunch, Patch.com's network of suburban news sites and online mapping service MapQuest. Combined with the Huffington Post, the sites will have a

total audience approaching 300 million people worldwide.

"I think that we have an incredible opportunity to tell the stories of our times, at the national level, at the local level and increasingly at the international level," Huffington told The Associated Press during an interview Monday.

Huffington's charisma and the high hopes riding on her were on display when she swung by AOL's New York offices Monday to introduce herself to about 300 employees. They greeted her with a standing ovation, according to Howard Fineman, a Huffington Post employee who accompanied his boss.

"She's the one who had them in the palm of her hand, explaining the mission and telling jokes. She's a star," said Fineman, who first met Huffington in 1994 while he was at Newsweek magazine writing a story about her.

Although she was already well-known as author and commentator with frequent appearances on TV and radio, Huffington didn't become prominent until she started the Huffington Post in 2005 with former AOL executive Kenneth Lerer. Backed by just \$1 million from her initial investors, Huffington thought there was a place for a site featuring the opinions of her celebrity pals, who would write for free.

The concept was initially ridiculed, but it resonated with people and became more popular as it started to repackage and comment on the top stories from other sites.

By the time AOL came courting, Huffington Post had more than 6,000 unpaid bloggers and a payroll of 210 people who occasionally score their own scoops. It ranks among the Internet's top 10 destinations for cultural and global news with an average of 25 million U.S. visitors per month.

The site's success stamped Huffington as the 28th most powerful woman in the world in an October 2010 list compiled by Forbes magazine. She ranked right behind Microsoft Corp. co-founder Bill Gates' wife, Melinda, who contributed a piece about vaccines to Huffington Post last month. (First Lady Michelle Obama topped that Forbes list).

Long before she became prominent in her own right, Huffington knew how to find her way into influential circles. When she married Texas oil scion Michael Huffington in 1987, philanthropist Ann Getty paid for the wedding, television news personality Barbara Walters was a bridesmaid and the guest list included former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. When her 2006 book "On Becoming Fearless" came out in 2006, Silicon Valley billionaire Larry Ellison hosted a reception in his San Francisco home overlooking the Golden Gate Bridge.

"The Internet was invented for Arianna Huffington," Fineman said. "Finally a medium was created for her and allows her to fully be what she was destined to be, which is a global networker."

Most of Huffington's 13 books are about political and social topics. One exception was a biography about Pablo Picasso that stands as testament to her love of art. When she invited a few reporters to join her for a dinner party with music and movie executive David Geffen at her Los Angeles-area home a few years ago, Huffington proudly pointed out a painting she said was done by Picasso's mistress.

Huffington was born in Athens in 1950 as Arianna Stassinopoulos. After her parents broke up while she was a teenager, she moved to England. She eventually enrolled at Cambridge University, where she would hone her verbal sparring skills as president of the Cambridge Union Society, a debating club dating back to 1815. She would also get a master's degree in economics.

After college, she developed a fascination with self-help philosophies that are said to still influence her today. She once was friendly with Werner Erhard, the founder of the self-help program "est," in the 1970s and later became a minister of in the Movement for Spiritual Inner Awareness founded by a man who would become known as "John-Roger." That connection came back to haunt her after published stories aired allegations of sexual and financial abuse against John-Roger.

Huffington embraced the conservative views of her husband, Michael, who was elected as a California congressman representing the Santa Barbara area in 1992. He then mounted a 1994 bid for a Senate seat against Dianne Feinstein. Arianna campaigned hard for her husband, but Michael Huffington lost, even after spending \$28 million of his own fortune.

After that setback, Arianna Huffington remained a staunch Republican who backed then-Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich.

Her politics began to lean to the left following her 1997 divorce from Michael Huffington, who later made even more news by revealing he was bisexual. The Huffingtons have two daughters, Christina, now 21, and Isabella, 19. They both attend Yale University.

Tony Blankley, Gingrich's former press secretary, has had an up-close view of Arianna Huffington's political evolution as the co-host of a National Public Radio Show called "Left, Right & Center," He now fills the conservative role that Arianna once played on the weekly program. The two remain good friends, largely because Blankley can't resist Arianna's flair.

"When you start looking for someone who's got her set of mind and personality, it's just real hard to find, left, right or center," Blankley says.

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