Hi, this is Tanya [Domi 00:00:01], welcome to the thought project recorded at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York fostering ground breaking research, and scholarship, in the arts, social science, and sciences.

In this space we talk to faulty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world.

Katharine Viner is editor and chief of the Guardian, a position she has held since June 2015. She joined the Guardian as a writer in 1997. She was appointed deputy editor of the Guardian in 2008, and later launched the award-winning Guardian Australia in 2013.

She also served as editor of the Guardian in the U.S. based in New York City. Viner is the 12th editor in chief of the Guardian during it’s nearly 200 years of publishing, and is the first woman to lead it. She will be awarded an honorary degree at the Graduate Center's commencement ceremonies held in Lincoln Center on May 30th.

Welcome Katharine Viner to the thought project podcast.

It's absolutely wonderful to be here Tanya.

First of all, congratulations on receiving an honorary degree from the Graduate Center. We are thrilled that you have accepted this honor, and I think it's symbolic of a bow to the importance of journalism at this moment, and how well the Guardian is reporting on seminal events that are taking place in the world right now.

You took the reigns of the Guardian in 2015, apparently three years ago this week, when the business model for modern newspapers was failing, you have effectively navigated the challenges of running an international news organization in the digital age with innovative business practices, and since taking over the Guardian mothership, I want to call it that, you've expanded readership and subscribers, you've increased your presence in Brussels and Berlin.

The Guardian is now operating with offices on at least three continents that I'm aware of.

Oh no, all continents. Don't worry about it.

I didn't know about the office part.

Three additions, you're right, additions in three continents.
Tanya Domi: How have you done this in this business climate, at least in America, where newspapers are cutting staff and even more shutting their doors. How have you done that?

Katharine Viner: The global strategy, we have gone from losing 58 million pounds in year one to just at 90 million pounds this year, it's still a loss, but we're on track to break even this year, which is the first time we've done that for a very long time.

Katharine Viner: We've been very serious about cost, so you mentioned American newspapers having to cut back, we've cut back quite dramatically too, all in a voluntary basis, but we've also brought in a new plank to the business model, which is revenue from reader contributions.

Katharine Viner: Our readers have always been very committed to the Guardian, they've always supported us in very valuable ways, but it was the first time we didn't use this model, and it's very unusual. In Britain, I think it's more common here with small news outlets, perhaps not on the scale of the Guardian. We've got 175 million browsers worldwide, so we're very, very large.

Katharine Viner: What we found was the readers really, really wanted to contribute, and this idea that if you contribute, and you give us some money, then you pay to keep the Guardian free and open to others who maybe can't afford to do so, perhaps in poorer countries or just poorer people in your own country, and that message really seemed to hit home for people.

Katharine Viner: I think we've been doing journalism that lots of people don't do. We're very committed to the most serious stuff, we're very committed to the stuff around the environment say, or around poverty, that I think others don't do as much, and we find actually that readers say that they're giving us money for that most serious journalism, and that's what's so wonderful because the business model has been led done this track of click bait, and trying for massive scale, and just all chasing the same thing.

Katharine Viner: What we've really discovered in a very heartening way is that you don't need to do that. Now, I'm not sure that model works for everyone. There aren't many progressive news organization in the world, and people know the Guardian is both progressive and committed to the facts, and that means a lot to me, and we've also got a close relationship with our readers which I think matters a lot.

Tanya Domi: Sure. You've mentioned that you work really hard to cement the relationship with your readers, and you're also at trust, which is a very different structure of operating, and it's not something that people in the United States would be familiar with.

Katharine Viner: The Guardian's ownership model is really wonderful, yes, we're owned by the Scott Trust, which mean that we have one share holder only, and that's the Scott Trust, we have no proprietor, and the Scott Trust only job is to make sure
that I as the editor in chief am protected from commercial and political interference.

Katharine Viner: If we were to make a profit which I hope we will do in the next couple of years, then that money has to be plowed back into journalism. There is no one who can take a dividend from the Guardian, so people can be certain that when they give money to the Guardian that it’s going to the things that matter most to the journalism, and that’s very exciting.

Tanya Domi: That’s very unique and not something that we hear anything about in the United States. You also have been quoted, and I’m speaking to you as the editor in chief obviously, about your respect for good reporting, and about serious journalism, to the effect that quote, it takes time and effort, carefully uncovers the facts holds the powerful to account, and interrogates ideas and arguments that speak to the urgency of the moment, but less like Europe, and last more than a day.

Tanya Domi: Is this how the Guardian approached joining the Panama Papers Consortium, which was a massive collaborative of investigative journalism, and also similarly you joined with the New York Times on the Edward Snowden paper.

Katharine Viner: Oh, they [crosstalk 00:06:44].

Tanya Domi: Yes, so that’s serious collaboration, serious investigative reporting.

Katharine Viner: Yeah, I really believe in collaborative projects, I mean, they’re very difficult to pull off. Lots of journalist, I have to say particularly in the United States, have a history of being very competitive with each other, rather than necessarily joining together.

Tanya Domi: Add the [inaudible 00:07:05] even perhaps.

Katharine Viner: And yet the truth is if the media is to remind people why we exist, why we exist in democracy is to hold the powerful to account, and it’s to do things that matter to civic society, and often you can do that more powerfully together.

Katharine Viner: We saw it more recently with the Cambridge Analytica exclusives which we got and we decided to share with the New York Times and with Channel four TV company in Britain. They both added wonderful things to the reporting, and it ended up being a much bigger story I think it would’ve been if we’d done it on our own.

Tanya Domi: Yeah, because you’re leveraging across geography and resources.

Katharine Viner: And there’s some legal protections there as well because obviously you’ve got the First Amendment which is a good thing.

Tanya Domi: Very strong.
Tanya Domi: Very strong. To what extent, given this collaborative work, how do you think the impact was of the Guardian's readership, the Guardian's reporting, and the response to the WikiLeaks story, I mean, we're still getting drips and drabs because of the Russia investigation, and obviously Cambridge Analytica played a huge role in that story but still to this day there's reporting of WikiLeaks emails, and it still continues to animate that investigation.

Katharine Viner: I think at the beginning lots of what WikiLeaks been involved with is very powerful and important stuff, which helps us report on really terrible events around the world, and it's important not to forget that, and that was important, but obviously what's happened more recently, and subsequently, and [inaudible 00:09:06]has alienated a lot of people who would of once been his allies, and it's got a sad story really.

Tanya Domi: So you think it's fair to say at this moment right now that democracy as a model is under fire, indeed even threatened globally, we are witnessing a global rise of authoritarianism, and nationalism, from New Delhi, to Washington D.C., to Warsaw, and Budapest. What is at stake in journalism right now?

Katharine Viner: That's a huge question because so much is at stake, and I think you're right the challenges are, I think we're on four different levels, I think the global level ... driven by technology these technological changes are unsettling to people even if technology changes will end up being great, really positive for society. It's quite very disruptive to I think who we are if you think about Mark Zuckerberg claiming he's going to cure all disease.

Katharine Viner: And you think that's lovely, thank you Mark, that'd be great. But actually, if you think about what that means to us as humans that's very disruptive, most of our conception at the end of life is preceded by disease and so on, so what does that mean, even just down to self driving cars, I think that's very disruptive to our views of ourself, and similarly at a global level what's happening to the climate I think is very disturbing to people, we can see the changes, it's quite obvious what's happening, every report is actually worse than people predicted.

Katharine Viner: And yet, we know by the way, just the way we live, we're contributing to making that worse, and yet there is no way accessibly to stop that, there is no structural global efforts to prevent that, and so it's this unsettling feeling at a global level, then that follow down at the national level, where we've had so many political shocks whether that's starting ... I think we started you could say with Brexits, obviously Trump's election, look what's happening in Italy this week.

Katharine Viner: I think at a local level what's been very acute in Britain is what austerity has done to local life, and I think-

Tanya Domi: Well, this is my next question.
Katharine Viner: So there's been a feeling I think for decades that community bonds are weakening in the public space is being sold off. The public arena is somehow being minimized, and then finally at a personal level where we see throughout the Western world, really disturbing figures on depression in young people, and loneliness in old people, and if you look at every one of those layers I think they all come together to a really a globally disruptive, disturbing, moment that's happened really quickly, it's been a very dramatic shift.

Katharine Viner: A number of cases from what happened in the financial crash of 2008 where the people who caused it seemed to have done better out of it than anyone else, and so on. There's many similar.

Tanya Domi: I think that 2008 was really a major turning point when you look at what happened in the E.U. specifically. One, you had the financial crash, two, you had a migration crisis of stupendous, I mean, the largest flow of human beings since World War II, and this was followed also at the same time by the invasion of Ukraine, the annexation of Crimea, and then you're looking at the Brexit vote.

Tanya Domi: Speaking of which, do you think that the Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump, have had similar impulses in retrospect, and I quite frankly was dismissive, and I'll totally own that I was dismissive of this idea, but now I think there are some parallels particularly on growing income and equality, and also looking at a constructed ... in the case of the United States it was a constructed immigration crisis, because it's not really one when you look at the data.

Tanya Domi: The migrate crisis in Europe from Syria, and Northern Africa, into Europe, you were talking about 5,000 people a day for months and months. What are your thoughts on that? I now think that there are some, but I'd love to hear your ideas on that.

Katharine Viner: I absolutely do think they have common threads, and I think a lot of it is about alienation, actually it's sort of alienation from ... you see some people getting richer and richer while your lives are not getting better at all. Just to tell you a really amusing story on this subject which was after the Brexit vote I remember saying to some American friends, well, at least Hillary Clinton will see this and realize that the danger to her is very real, and she will surely choose a running mate who will answer the concerns of the white working class.

Katharine Viner: I have that on record that I said that, and then on the say of the election I said to the team, I said, Donald Trump's gonna be president anyway, nobody believed me but I think these are all global threads, and I think Hillary Clinton didn't see it coming and I don't think the Democrats from what I can see are seeing it now, and it's such a disruptive moment.

Tanya Domi: I will tell you speaking on good council, a colleague of mine who's in South Carolina, which is a big primary state in the U.S. presidential election, she just indicated to me that Elizabeth Warren gave the Democratic caucus in the house
legislature, 8,000 dollars without any solicitation on their part, so I think she's running, or she's positioning herself to run, it would seem.

Tanya Domi: You don't do that. You don't give the Democratic caucus in the state legislature 8,000 dollars unless you're interested.

Katharine Viner: He's gonna be tough to beat again though again don't you think.

Tanya Domi: I think given the way he has conducted himself, the attacks on all the institutions, the attacks on the investigation, the attacks on the media, it's putting this entire country in this state of disbelief by those of us who may oppose him, and on his side he's just shoring people up over and over again, and as a matter of fact, his approvals now are up to 40%, so that is very disheartening but I get it.

Katharine Viner: It seems there has been such a shift in what people believe to be true and what people don't believe to be true, and I think he's been very effective.

Tanya Domi: I agree.

Katharine Viner: At spreading disinformation and fake news and misunderstanding, which is obviously very disturbing when you work in the media.

Tanya Domi: Absolutely. You may of heard the Leslie Stall conversation, she's a correspondent with 60 Minutes, she was speaking about her first meeting with Trump after the election, she was with her boss from CBS, and she was in Trump Tower and he kept talking about how bad the media is, and she said look, you got the nomination, what's your problem, why are you doing this? This is old and it's not very impressive, and he said, I'm attacking the media because when you write negative stories about me they're not going to believe it. Wow. Wow.

Katharine Viner: That's completely cynical. Completely cynical.

Tanya Domi: Completely cynical. So speaking of not only disinformation but when you think about a comparison between Britain and the U.S., the Brexit vote, and the situation the led to outcomes that were shocking to both countries in different ways. Yesterday, you may have seen it, the New York Times published a story about Britain and about the austerity approach by [inaudible 00:16:56] governments, cutting city budgets, looking less like ... the reporter was looking less like Europe and more like the U.S. and less like Europe because of their general social welfare approach to liberal governance with some exceptions of course.

Tanya Domi: It seems that voters in the U.K. are not much different from voters in mostly red state America, and it reminds me of the great read What's the Matter with Kansas, you might know about that by American political scientist Thomas Frank, and he lays out the facts that American voters have been voting against
their self interest for years, indeed, in this case it was Prescott England which the New York Times uses as an example, they're selling off public space to make money so they can make payroll for police and teachers, but now in the United States, even in the age of Trump, we are beginning to see the first visages of a backlash in red state America were you may have been reading about.

Tanya Domi: And of course, the Guardian's covered it, strikes by teachers in West Virginia, Kentucky, Oklahoma, I mean people barely are taking home 1,000 dollars a month in Oklahoma as a teacher, they can't support themselves, the United States as you probably know has the largest income gap, inequality gap, between the highest 1% and the rest of us.

Tanya Domi: Even with degrees, African-Americans and women are not able to make up that gap, and they're not making more money, so there's a stagnation in wages. I think it's very similar between Britain and the United States, and what's your view on this?

Katharine Viner: I mean, it's a very strong piece and I think it was that sort of piece you can do if you have a distance on the subject, and that's why I thought it was so powerful. I wouldn't say though that ... I think most of the people quoted in the story were opposed to the cuts, and certainly the area he's talking about-

Tanya Domi: Fair enough.

Katharine Viner: Is in Liverpool they certainly will not be voting conservative in Liverpool anytime soon.

Tanya Domi: Sure.

Katharine Viner: I remember there is a hung Parliament in Britain at the moment that is not actually a conservative majority government, so just-

Tanya Domi: Fair enough.

Katharine Viner: And also, just to carry on being defensive of Britain for one minute we do still have a fantastic health service even if it's challenged financially, the health service and the BBC are the two most cherished institutions in the country, and by the way I think the BBC, having this good state funded broadcaster like the BBC I do think protects you from having two different types of news.

Katharine Viner: It seems to me in America-

Tanya Domi: Sure. Like the United States between Fox and the rest of them.

Katharine Viner: Yes. I do think that's some kind of protection. There is no question that since 2010 when the conservative led coalition government brought in austerity. There's not question that the model that they had in mind is more American
than European. I mean, it's often been true hasn't it, that Britain is somewhere between the two.

Tanya Domi: That's true. That's true.

Katharine Viner: And this challenge is all across Europe but generally not around the social contract. I wouldn't say they have a huge amount of public support for what they've been doing on this.


Tanya Domi: Since 2016, the election and Hillary Clinton's lose there has been a literal uprising by women in America, and I actually refer to it as the Hillary Effect. I have never seen anything like it since second wave feminism in the '70s. The Women's March went global, it was everywhere including Antarctica.

Tanya Domi: The avalanche of women declaring their candidacies for office in this past week, seven women won, Democrats won their congressional primary races and in like a lot of red states, Kentucky, Texas, just incredible a black woman won the primary for the governor of Georgia. That's a first time in America.

Tanya Domi: I've read articles and clearly I see that you're covering me too, but when you go into an editorial meeting what are you talking about? This is a big, big thing happening.

Katharine Viner: It's very exciting and just look at [Island 00:21:41] over the weekend, it was just the most moving, beautiful, outcome and it was a really moving and beautiful campaign as well, I mean, everything about it from the teashop down was really exciting, so yes, that seems like a big feminist moment too.

Katharine Viner: I think in terms of how we operate, obviously it's one of the biggest stories in the world, and I think that's really interesting. I think the role of men within that is also quite interesting, because I think their role is challenged and we see some quite unpleasant aspects of that as well, and concurrently.

Katharine Viner: I have sorta a job to do to make sure that we reflect it in our coverage and make sure that every ... we think about sorta a representation in terms of everything we do, every decision we make, which woman's voices we use, which photographs we use, which women's stories we tell, and how can we make sure that it's a kind of really plural, plural women so it's lots of women of color and so on.

Tanya Domi: Very, very incredible and it will interesting to see where it all goes.

Katharine Viner: There's a great quote from Rebecca [Sonet 00:22:47] where she said, this insurrectionary moment is already subsiding but things will not be what they were.
Tanya Domi: Oh, yes, yes, yes, that's wonderful. That is indeed wonderful. We're gonna see where it goes. I'm very excited about prospects in the fall for the election. Nonetheless, reports by human rights group, and I want to go back to more sobering developments such as Freedom House here in the United States, and even the Economist, indicate a global downward trend in functioning, healthy, democracies.

Tanya Domi: Now, this is not surprising because we are now witnessing an increased attack on journalists. Jailings in Turkey, shootings in the Balkans, a journalist in Nicaragua was murdered last month when he was reporting live on Facebook. I recently spoke with the Council of Europe human rights commissioner Dunja Mijatović, a former colleague of mine in Sarajevo, and she actually asks me to pose a question to you and said, how can the Guardian help in overcoming human rights fatigue in Europe on harassment of journalists and for human rights defenders in general. This is a hard thing. The fatigue.

Katharine Viner: The fatigue's interesting. I generally think the answer to most questions is go back to reporting, just go and report, go and tell the stories, because there are always stories to be told that can be told these days in many different ways. Many different formats from podcasts, to videos, to the writing the stories in the old school way, but I think the answer is not to necessarily to do opinion columns, I just want to get back to real fact based reporting.

Tanya Domi: Shoe leather so to speak, yeah.

Katharine Viner: Yeah, and I do think collaboration is another important technique, we've discussed it briefly, but in April we launched the Daphne Project, so this is continuing the work of Daphne Caruana Galizia, who is the journalist who was assassinated in Malta last year.

Tanya Domi: Oh, yes.

Katharine Viner: And what we want to say with the project is you can assassinate one of our journalists, but one journalist, but many more will fill their place. We've got a global collaboration involving 18 organizations [inaudible 00:25:10], Le Monde, The New York Times, we're working together to continue those investigations and I think that sends a real message that we're not expendable, we're going to keep going.

Tanya Domi: And stay at it.

Katharine Viner: Yes, and just the most important thing is the story, but it's more and more ... even democratically elected leaders no longer see the part of democracy as essential [inaudible 00:25:35], and this is what is so disturbing, you know, Trump described and quoted us enemies of the people, which is a very disturbing development, and of course-
Tanya Domi: Taking a page out of Stalin.

Katharine Viner: Indeed, and back to the Guardian you may know that a Republican congressman Greg Gianforte from Montana he attacked a Guardian reporter when he asked a question, and again, I'm surprising that isn't a bigger outrage in the U.S.

Tanya Domi: Speaking of collaborations I do want to give a shout out, I don't think a lot of people know this, but what prompted you to reach out to the Parkland High School journalism program and the newspaper there, and to invite them to edit, guest edit, for a weekend, I was so moved by that I almost cried.

Katharine Viner: It was wonderful, wasn't it.

Tanya Domi: I think it was an amazing thing to do. Tell us about that.

Katharine Viner: So the Guardian in the U.S. has 45 journalists here and I'm sure you noticed that Matt De Blasio said it was his favorite newspaper over the weekend.

Tanya Domi: Yes I did see that.

Katharine Viner: I would rather think that's a good thing, or bad thing it's up to them, but I'm glad he read us, and I'm glad if anyone reads us.

Tanya Domi: For now, it is, next week it could change.

Katharine Viner: So we have 45 journalists here and the [inaudible 00:26:58] of Guardian U.S. they were just sort of brainstorming ideas of how to cover the anti-gun march, and the idea was well what about if we had some of the Parkland pupils to cover the march, and I thought, well, why don't they guest edit for the weekend, and we went to the pupils from the school newspaper, Eagle Eye, I think it's called from memory, and the project was so wonderful. They got an interview with Bernie Sanders, they got a lovely message from George Clooney, they just did these lovely creative things.

Tanya Domi: They were doing stand up interviews too. It was an amazing thing to watch.

Katharine Viner: Yeah, and I think it was, more seriously, it was so exemplary in terms of a collaborative project I think, and I think it also really showed a way perhaps in the way that the Parkland students generally have shown a way for how future positive developments, they're a really inspiring group.

Tanya Domi: They are. They're leading the country, it's wonderful to watch them. I just want to ask a couple other questions. Trump is going to be visiting the U.K. in July.

Katharine Viner: Yes, indeed, yes.
Tanya Domi: It's called a working meeting and I don't think that Teresa May wants him in London more, I'm sure the streets will be filled with protest. Won't this be quite an unusual visit, because given the animosity Trump has for Europe, the special relationship that has always existed doesn't seem to be so special in the Trump era, as a matter of fact he's gone out of his way to dismiss most of the post-WWII Euro Atlantic relationships.

Tanya Domi: Our best friends in Europe are befuddled, shocked, so how will you cover this visit? I think it's really going to be I think uncomfortable.

Katharine Viner: It's interesting Trump's relationships with European leaders because he seems to like the leaders who flatten him the most, but then there's been an interesting research that they don't necessarily get the best outcomes from him, so it's quite interesting.

Katharine Viner: Teresa May came here quite early on, was photographed holding his hand, which went down very well, did not go down very well in Britain. But then, his relationship with Macron is interesting, he went over and had the full pomp & ceremony, I think it was on Bastille Day, as I remember, who protest a lot, they're very good at protesting, there was not a huge protest for that visit, which surprised me.

Katharine Viner: I think I expect that to be different in July, in Britain, I expect there to be considerable protests, and we will cover every bit of it. I expect there to be lots of global interest in that story.

Tanya Domi: I think that's a big story. One last question, and it's sort of personal in a way, not really, not personal, personal, but two national newspapers in the United States, The New York Times has an online column for philosophers in the academy call The Stone Column, and the Washington Post, a very popular monkey cage, monkey cage platform, which is for academics only.

Tanya Domi: These are platforms have gotten a lot of attention, particularly monkey cage, and it's edited by academics with The Washington Post, would the Guardian think about such a platform, because here's why, in the age of the 21st century, particularly those of us who work in public institutions, and the public universities, I have many colleagues in the U.K. that are in the academy, would they be interested in thinking about such a platform for academics, because this is the time?

Tanya Domi: There are more platforms now to share critical research and information in the age of, quite frankly, propaganda and fake news, which I hate that term.

Katharine Viner: Because Trump's [crosstalk 00:31:24].

Tanya Domi: It's not our brand name. Let's just go back to Stalin. It's propaganda. That's really what we're talking about here, but I would think, you know, the Guardian
has leaned forward in so many different ways, so many people in the academy love the newspaper, a number of our faculty have been published in it, so I'm just sorta throwing it out there.

Katharine Viner: It sounds like a really good idea. I'm not familiar with it, with the monkey cage-

Tanya Domi: I will send you a link.

Katharine Viner: Well, I'll find it. I can find it. All I'd say though I would be quite sad because clearly The Washington Post have already got the best cage. I mean, monkey cage, what could be better?

Tanya Domi: That's true.

Katharine Viner: That would be hard to top there.

Tanya Domi: Hard to top. Katharine Viner, thank you very much for being with us today. Congratulations again.

Katharine Viner: Thank you so much, Tanya.

Tanya Domi: Thanks for tuning in to The Thought Project and thanks to our guest, Katharine Viner, the editor in chief of the Guardian.

Tanya Domi: The Thought Project was produced in partnership with Cuni TV, located at The Graduate Center in the heart of New York City, with production, engineering, and technical assistance by Sarah Fishman and Jack Horowitz.

Tanya Domi: I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.