

*She Said/She Said Podcast With Laura Cox Kaplan  
Special Women's History Month Bonus Episode  
"Hidden Influence And The First "Podcaster" At The White House"  
Episode 235  
Guest: Julia Sweig, Historian & Author "Hiding In Plain Sight"*

Laura Cox Kaplan ([00:06](#)):

Building influence is something anyone can learn. It's an investment you can make in yourself and it can hold the keys to achieving your dreams and having the life and impact you want to have. I'm Laura Cox Kaplan. I've learned a lot over three decades about building and sustaining influence and how using it and using it effectively can make a big, big difference in your life and career. Here on She Said/She Said Podcast, we're digging into the different dimensions that help us build and sustain influence. If you thought being an influencer was just for social media, think again. Whether you're starting a business, raising money for a cause, negotiating a promotion, running your household, or trying to connect with those who don't share your views, understanding and using the different dimensions of influence will increase your chances of success. Whatever your goals may be, listening to She Said/She Said Podcast is a smart, efficient investment you can make in you. I'm really glad you're here and I'm excited we're on this journey together.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([01:18](#)):

Hey friend, welcome to She Said/She Said Podcast in honor of Women's History Month. This month I'm doing something a little different. In this episode, I've gone back into our She said, she said archives and I've pulled a couple of conversations and repackaged them, which I think you're really going to love. The first, which I'm sharing with you today is a conversation that I just loved about the woman who was, in essence, the first podcaster at the White House. I'm talking about Lady Bird Johnson. Her influence and her role in history was not well understood. That is until historian Julius Swig ran across some largely ignored audio tapes recorded by Mrs. Johnson herself during her time as First Lady. The recordings some 123 hours began with Mrs. Johnson's firsthand account of the tragic events that led to her husband becoming President. Julius Swig joins me for this conversation and we take a deep dive into how she ran across this material and what we now know about Mrs.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([02:35](#)):

Johnson's influence with her husband, the impact that she had on history and just more about her own insights and observations. And in some cases, Mrs. Johnson's own admitted self-doubt and insecurities all told in her own voice and in her own words. Julia used this material and wrote a book called Hiding in Plain Sight, and then produced a terrific, truly terrific eight part podcast, which includes clips from some of those original audio recordings made by Mrs. Johnson. I literally get chills just thinking about it. It is absolutely fantastic. If you've already listened to Julia's podcast, I think you'll enjoy this complimentary conversation with her about what she learned about Mrs. Johnson and ultimately putting this information into context as we think about this bigger topic of influence, what it is and how we use it. I think Women's History Month is a perfect opportunity to reflect on how far we've come and to celebrate some of those lesser known stories about incredible women in our history, including Mrs. Johnson. Here is my conversation with historian Julia. Sweet.

Julia Sweig ([03:53](#)):

Laura, I'm so delighted to be here with you. Thanks for having me.

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Laura Cox Kaplan ([03:56](#)):

Well, I'm delighted to have you. As I mentioned to you before we started recording, I am fully obsessed with this podcast that you have created on Lady Bird Johnson. It is truly fantastic. As we get into this, I want you to tell us how you stumbled across these diaries. I mean, this was not your area necessarily of expertise, historical figures, former First ladies. Talk about what happened and what captivated you about these audio tapes, how you even learned about them in the first place.

Julia Sweig ([04:36](#)):

I love this thread, so let me just take it piece by piece and say first of all that my very first book that I wrote was based on unexamined material in archives as well, although they were Fidel Castro's archives in Havana and retelling a story that we thought we already knew using the archives of the principal subject I'm writing about turns out was sort of already in my gray matter. I mean, I have put it together as that origin story. Now, I don't think I thought of it when I stumbled upon, and it wasn't really a stumble on the Ladybird diaries, but there is something really thrilling about being a historian who retells a story that's been told that the received wisdom says is X and de mythologizing and debunking those mythologies. So I did that with the way that Cuban revolution took place and how Fidel Castro took power, and I did that 20 years ago or something, and then, as you say, had a long career doing many other things related to Cuba and foreign policy in Latin America.

Julia Sweig ([05:49](#)):

And after doing that here in Washington DC and in New York and traveling around Latin America, I just got to a point of sort of stagnation intellectually. I needed to teach myself something new. And I also had been working in foreign policy where the gender imbalance is very pronounced and sitting in rooms full of men, mostly as the only woman for years and years and years. I mean, that's a story we can all tell, but here I got to the point where I wanted to try to pull back and write about women and power. And to be honest, I didn't have a subject and I started sort of noodling this around. And

Laura Cox Kaplan ([06:31](#)):

How long ago was this?

Julia Sweig ([06:32](#)):

Okay, so this tells you what a long project is this. This was in 2012. Oh, wow. Actually before I turned 50 years old when I was 45, I always have a five year plan and I needed to know that I was going to be making a pivot by the time I turned 50. So I'm not going to exactly tell you what the age and date, how that lines up, but the point is that it was quite a while ago at this point where I started to think need to do something new. And so an acquaintance who I was talking with this about told me Lady Bird Johnson kept a diary and that I had no idea, but I did know that she is a person who's married, who was married to the American president, maybe most associated with the word power in the 20th century.

Julia Sweig ([07:24](#)):

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So that began a process of finding first her collected volume of edited diaries that she published in 1970. It was on the New York Times bestseller list for 13 weeks, but it's very redacted and very limited. And then I went to the LBJ library in Austin, this is a couple years later having read as much of the secondary literature as I could. And in that library, and you hear this in the podcast, there's a museum, I don't know if you've been there, your listeners have been there. So you walk into an exhibit space, which is about the LBJ presidency actually his entire career, and it's very dark and dim and emotion sensor triggers her voice and it comes on and you hear her narrating her experience of the JFK assassination on November 22nd, 1963, and it's so gripping, and that of course opened the door to this multi-year process of listening to her audio recordings, all of them by now, and reading all of the transcripts and trying to put her back inside of the LBJ story because she'd been sort of marginal to the story as told until then. Right.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([08:47](#)):

Why do you think she was so marginalized and why do we not know a lot? We're going to talk in this conversation a lot, what you have uncovered through her diary entries, but why do you think she was so marginalized and why do I have the impression even as a native Texan of someone who was more frivolous, just focused on flowers and beautification as something that is a frivolous idea as opposed to what it actually was and very complimentary to other things that were happening in the administration?

Julia Sweig ([09:26](#)):

So there's a lot of answers to that. I mean, first of all, she, she was a journalism and history major at UT in Austin, so she really had in her gray matter a commitment to recording and documenting even well before she met LBJ, right? That was before. But as his career progressed, she started keeping records and that material, I say that because on the one hand, she was very conscious of history and recording it, especially by the time they got into the White House. But on the other hand, she was a woman of her time who was very conscious too, of who acted engaged in certain acts of subterfuge to conceal her power and influence. It wasn't even that she, I think, thought to herself, I have a lot of power and influence and I need to conceal it because I'm married to this charismatic, thin-skinned man, and the country isn't ready yet for a powerful woman in the White House.

Julia Sweig ([10:27](#)):

That wasn't the narrative. It was more that this was her training and her socialization, and I think she had a lot of modesty. And so that's on the one hand that she was careful to mind how her public, I imagine how she represented herself to the public, although she had a very act, she was very activist, but she cared her, she cultivated her image carefully. Second thing is though, of course, that the historiography, all of the history that's been written about LBJ, journalistic historians, biographers, and this isn't unique to LBJ, but we're talking about that presidency focus on the great man in the Oval Office. That's the nature of presidential history, and it's the nature of male storytelling to maybe not look in a rounded way. It has driven a, there's some blinders there. So the material that has been analyzed and studied and excavated has been of focus on LBJ and the people around him and not so much Ladybird, even though she was in the room all the time,

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Laura Cox Kaplan ([11:49](#)):

Which was pretty unusual for the time as I gather, you didn't have first ladies of that particular generation, if you will, who were that involved? I mean, Jackie Kennedy was not that involved in JFK's administration, at least as far as I know, and not involved in policy making and didn't have offices and all of that.

Julia Sweig ([12:11](#)):

It was, I think that her modernization of the East Wing as a component of the whole White House political operation is very significant. She's really the bridge from Eleanor Roosevelt to Hillary Clinton. I don't know if Lady Bird Johnson has security clearance, but she was certainly in the room and reading his documents. I mean, often the room was the bedroom. He famously had staff meetings in his bedroom all the time, and she was often there when you just look at all of the images in the LBJ Library website, you see her in the Oval Office all the time. So I think it is unusual and not something we've known because they didn't broadcast it, but certainly LBJ knew it. She knew it, but they were careful to titrate the way the public received that information.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([13:07](#)):

Talk about how her beautification efforts actually were such a pivotal part of the Civil rights movement and this what became the Civil Rights bill. Talk about how those pieces fit together, because I have to admit my ignorance, I really never thought about it in the way in which she was apparently thinking about it and in the way that you've presented it in the book and in the podcast. Talk a little bit about that.

Julia Sweig ([13:34](#)):

Yes, I was very surprised to find the way her time in the White House brought together civil rights and what we would call today environmental justice, especially in Washington dc. Beautification is the word that she says much later in her life. I'll never forgive Lyndon's Boys for making me use that word as a cover for my environmental agenda. And she hated the word. She shed it off by the end of her time in the White House, she started out with this idea, which she put together with Stuart Beall, who was the Secretary of Interior, and a very significant environmentalist with the idea that she could use her first lady energy toward beautifying Washington DC and making it a model for the rest of the country. But very soon into this process that involved philanthropists and landscape architects and garden club ladies and sort of big Tent Johnson politics in a way, she started feeling quite uncomfortable with that.

Julia Sweig ([14:46](#)):

And so I think of her evolution as one that, and beautification as one that goes from ornamental, literally just planting flowers and beautifying. And we see that in Washington today, Washington's in Bloom, and a lot of that is thanks to her from ornamental to Fundamental and this, and so she developed over time without a budget. The East Wing doesn't pass legislation. It doesn't have a budget, but it has its famous and now very significant convening power partnerships with black Washington. Washington DC was the

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largest majority black city at the time, but it also in the 1960s and still today, I mean obviously there's no statehood, but almost entirely unrepresented and incapable of having its own budget and taxing authority and therefore participation for its citizens and decisions about itself. And with the segregation that came in Washington at the time, there was also total deprivation of public services in Northeast and Southeast and Southwest and all of the neighborhood, the non-white neighborhoods of DC at the time.

Julia Sweig ([15:57](#)):

So she started partnering with a very special man who actually became the first elected mayor of Washington, Walter Washington, who in 1960, in the early sixties, in late fifties, was the head of the National Capital Housing Authority to try to bring the idea of empowerment and beautification together with that of representation and civil rights. And over the course of her time in the White House, deployed her staff from the East Wing and organized big money from civil rights supporting philanthropists and radical landscape architects from California to try to develop a way to convert all the green space along the Anacostia River, which of course is not the Potomac River and quite neglected, but controlled by the National Park Service into a desegregated public recreation space where access to nature for the residents living there would be the priority. That's the story behind beautification in Washington DC with Washington as the model for the rest of the country.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([17:09](#)):

It's absolutely fascinating. It just as I have listened to this and as I've read your book, there were so many details that I never put the pieces together. So it's really, it's quite incredible. Let's talk about her partnership with President Johnson and his reliance on her in a way that I think also surprises people notwithstanding what you just said about her being in all these photographs and being in the room and in the Oval Office all the time and in their bedroom where he was conducting meetings and elsewhere, as I understand it, he would conduct meetings in other water, otherwise known as private places. Talk about their partnership and how he relied on her.

Julia Sweig ([17:54](#)):

Well, by the time they got into the White House, and that's the primary focus of the podcast in the book are the White House years, they really had a joint political and business enterprise that they built and shared together. Lady Bird's activism as a business person goes back to her financing the acquisition of their radio station and her involvement in the growth of their media holdings in Texas that begins in the 1940s. At the same time as his congressional career grows, she's increasingly out on the hustings with him and could famously memorize and repeat to him the names of everybody in the room of some fundraiser that she might have just been to. So they are totally intertwined in terms of their political operation and their business operation in 1960. This really becomes evident because he and she joined the Kennedy ticket in that campaign, and Jackie Kennedy has been suffering miscarriages, doesn't want to go out on the campaign trail and risk another one. Lady Bird travels all around the country as Jackie Surrogate and as LBJ Surrogate. And of course, Bobby Kennedy famously says that Ladybird won Texas for JFK.

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Julia Sweig ([19:21](#)):

But I, I'd say that by way of background, because by the time they take office because of the tragedy of assassination, their jointness is, they're totally inseparable in terms of their vision for the country domestically and also in terms of their awareness of how difficult it's going to be to keep the country united. And they feel very readily the tension between being pushed to escalate in Vietnam and their desire to deepen the progressive social reforms that started under fdr, who was their idol. And so that joint enterprise continues from the day they enter the White House until the moment they leave, and it, it's manifest in her role in setting the arc of the presidency, meaning making sure that he runs in 1964 when he has many, many doubts, a big story that also has not been told before, and also participating actively in his exit strategy that we see come to the surface March 31st, 1968 when he announces he won't run again.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([20:40](#)):

What did you learn Julia about? I mean, LBJ was a larger than life personality, what you learn about their relationship on a more personal level and her ability to work with him, manage him to some degree. There's a lot of complexity in this relationship. Talk about what you learned about that aspect of this partnership.

Julia Sweig ([21:07](#)):

So the layers and complexity of the marriage, of course, anybody that's been married for more than a minute understands that, or married or together with anyone else for more than a minute, understands that layers are comp and comp complexity are also impenetrable from the outside. Nobody knows where really goes on inside of a marriage. That's the cliché, the truism, but it's true. And so my, I'm Hazarding, I'm surmising here making an intelligent guess, Laura but

Laura Cox Kaplan ([21:41](#)):

She didn't talk about this.

Julia Sweig ([21:43](#)):

So of course what has been talked about is a lot of emphasis on the negative sides of the marriage, on LBJs infidelities on his vulgarities and on his mistreatment of her in public verbally. And I just thought that, and could see right away that clearly this is, I mean, it couldn't be but hurtful to her, but it paints her as his victim. That mythology, and it deprives her of agency and it neutralizes, minimized, disappears her substance. So when I took the time to read all of the material, not just her diaries, but all of the policy material and campaign material that are in the LBJ library and in other archives around the country, what you see is that what she brought to the table was the ability, as you say, not just to manage him, but to ground him, to give him, I mean, we talk about the emotional ballast that women in power in marriages to powerful men provide, but it wasn't that just, it was political savvy, it was judgment, it was a strategic mind, it was judge of character.

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Julia Sweig ([23:00](#)):

It was a highly compartmentalized, contained personality who knew how to take care of herself so that she could take care of him. And by the time they get into the White House, that's an enormous amount of power that she exercises over him. So I place that into the full context and think, well, every marriage has its trade-offs. I don't want to deny that. It's horrible to know about how busy he was outside of the marriage, but there's a much bigger picture, and it's something that she clearly made peace with. What you hear in this material is how much she loved him and vice versa.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([23:44](#)):

Yeah, it's so fascinating. So one question that springs to mind that you referenced in the book, and I believe you referenced it in the podcast as well, is that you hear elements of self-doubt, maybe even imposter syndrome or what we talk about as imposter syndrome now, and you think about this complicated relationship that she had with this very big personality, and how where did that strength and that confidence come from to plow through that, that you hear?

Julia Sweig ([24:20](#)):

Well, one of my listeners wrote to me and said that she thought it was related to lady surviving the loss of her mother. Her mother died when she was five years old. She was raised by her father who was this larger than life kind of Tennessee Williams character. She was raised by descendants of enslaved people. This is in east Texas, on the border with Louisiana and by an aunt from Alabama. She had a lot of grit, and she as a lifetime reader and a lifetime, a long lifetime person who sought solace in nature, she really did have the ability to, she was an incredible survivor and she was very, very intelligent. But it's hard to know exactly what shapes people. Does trauma shape people or does opportunities shape people or a combination of both? And I think taking my cue from her too, she always talked about how Lyndon himself stretched her, how he pushed her to be her best possible self.

Julia Sweig ([25:31](#)):

So when we hear about those stories about him, her giving him a hard time about her clothing, this wasn't as much, you know, don't look nice, be more femmy or something. It was also rise to your capacity and show the world how amazing you are back to the father gave her a lot of autonomy, gave her, I think confidence, encouraged her intellect by bringing in this kind of eccentric aunt to help raise her who was an upper and read very well, well-read herself. So I think by the time she meets Lbj, you're right, she was trained to deal with the big personality but LBJ saw her very remarkable attributes, and that's something about him. He was very good at spotting low ego, highly intelligent people and bringing them into his inner circle. And many of them stayed there for decades as the baby part.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([26:40](#)):

So fascinating. Let's talk a bit her relationship with Mrs. Kennedy. Mrs. Kennedy had a very interesting persona and a very different role in the White House in later years, as we've uncovered in her own audio

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Episode 235  
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tape. She says things that are not particularly kind. She's said a lot of snarky things about a lot of people, <laugh>

Julia Sweig ([27:04](#)):

Snarky,

Laura Cox Kaplan ([27:05](#)):

But Lady Bird in particular, which is interesting given the role that Lady Bird played, as you just said, in serving as a surrogate for Jackie on the campaign trail, and really helping the administration talk a little bit about their relationship, which is, I understand it kind of evolved, but I found Jackie's comments to be, or Mrs. Kennedy's comments to be interesting given that relationship.

Julia Sweig ([27:30](#)):

It did evolve. Look it, it's an interesting arc, and it goes from the 1950s until Jackie dies in the 1990s. In the 1950s, once LBJ becomes majority leader, he conf his seniority confers to Ladybird. So she's sort of the queen of the Senate spouses, and they meet once a month, and it's a time for intelligence gathering and intelligence spreading. And as I imagine it and she brought Jackie in, and Jackie was a socialite. I mean, she was a debutante and an equestrian, and she studied in Paris and she was very, very different in orientation and culture than Ladybird. And each of them knew that, but they were very respectful to one another. Ladybird, you can hear it on the podcast, speaks of her quite adoringly. In 1960, the tables turn and Lyndon loses in the first ballot in Los Angeles at the convention, and Jack is now on top and asks LBJ to be his vice president.

Julia Sweig ([28:39](#)):

So suddenly the asymmetry that the Johnsons had been used to flips, and they're on the bottom who wants to be vice president, but they couldn't find a way to say no. So Ladybird becomes Jackie's surrogate as Jackie's trying to have more babies. And Jackie's not the political animal, I shouldn't say not entirely. She's not as much of a political animal as Ladybird is. And the cultural differences between the Kennedy and Johnson clans become more and more pronounced. And the Kennedy team is very, very negative about Lbj. They spread these terrible kind of cultural biases about the South and Cornpone and all of the kind of ways of smearing the Johnsons and it's very, very hurtful, although between Jackie and Ladybird and Linden and even Jack, there is a kind of intimacy and understanding and mutual, especially between Jackie, Ladybird and London after the assassination. And I do want your listeners to listen to the podcast and read the book, so I don't want to give away the whole story.

Julia Sweig ([29:52](#)):

Jackie and Ladybird Orchestrate are really incredible transition, incredible in terms of its grace and its care and it's, and its caution and the way they treated one another during that process. But once Jackie leaves Washington dc, the distance then does set in, and I think Jackie's snarkiness that you hear in talking about Lady Bird is very much tainted by Bobby Kennedy, who's lost his brother and who very

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*Episode 235*  
*Guest: Julia Sweig, Historian & Author "Hiding In Plain Sight"*

much wants to be in politics. And he and Linden have what my friend, the historian Jeff Sheel calls mutual contempt and it infects everything, and I think it definitely affects Jackie. So by the time Bobby himself is assassinated and Jackie and Ladybird see one another at his funeral, you really get a sense from Lady Bird's telling of it. And we hear it and I write about it of just how much distance between the two of them, but they recover their relationship in the aftermath of lb J's death and Lady Bird's very long post presidency.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([31:02](#)):

Yeah, she spent as I understand it time with Jackie on Martha's Vineyard at Redgate Farm multiple times. Right. Which sort of

Julia Sweig ([31:10](#)):

Multiple times every year for years in the 1980s. Yes, I would've loved to be a fly on the wall there.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([31:18](#)):

Okay, so I have what is maybe a mundane, or may seem like a mundane process question, but in some of the photographs I noticed she's got her microphone, she's recording these diary entries, but there are envelopes that are dated behind her, and there's a piece of paper that she's reading from. So was she writing these diaries in longhand and then recording them after the fact? Or was she doing it spontaneously, or what was her process? Did you gather how she did this and why

Julia Sweig ([31:51](#)):

It did? I did, and it's an excellent question and not a mundane one because I think it goes Laura to what a, can I say badass? She was sure. So as I said, she was trained as a journalist and historian, and before she got into the White House and for probably we had decades of them, but they haven't been processed, she kept little tiny spiral notebooks with her and kept in Greg's shorthand, took notes on everything, and even took notes. And I don't know if it was in longhand or shorthand on the flight back from Dallas to the White House to Washington DC on the day of the assassination. So this was a woman who was constantly gathering material. The way she produced her audio recording was not in longhand first. Her staff in those envelopes, you see, would put together for every day press clippings, ladybirds daily diary, that is her schedule, Lyndon's schedule memos, guest list, all kinds of material that would allow her to then record her first draft of history. It's really kind of amazing. She didn't write her diary entries down first, her first draft of recordings. Wow. And that's stunning, right? Because she could sit there and synthesize and tell a story and do it in these cogent paragraphs. She very seldom would Rew rewind and rerecord her straight first drafts were incredibly remarkable, and then before she left the White House, they started to transcribe them.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([33:34](#)): That is fascinating, that in fact, I find that quite stunning especially as somebody who spends a lot of time in front of a microphone. To be able to do that spontaneously without editing, without pausing, without cleaning it up that is remarkable. And to tell a story that coherently, that's really stunning.

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Julia Sweig ([33:55](#)):

She's the first podcaster in the White House.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([33:57](#)):

She really is.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([34:02](#)):

Julia, this has been such a pleasure. Thank you for the book and for the amazing podcast. I will include links to both in the show notes for the episodes episode 149. Really grateful for your time today.

Julia Sweig ([34:17](#)):

Laura, thank you so much for having me. What a wonderful interview. I'm very happy to meet you.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([34:22](#)):

Hey, friend, thanks so much for joining us today. To learn a bit more about Julius Swag, check out the show notes for this episode, episode 149. I've also included links to both Julia's terrific book on Mrs. Johnson called Lady Bird Johnson, hiding in Plain Sight, as well as the terrific podcast called In Plain Sight. You'll find those materials, as I said in the show notes for this episode. Now, before I let you go, I need your help. If you're enjoying, she said, said podcast. I would love to hear from you, and there are several ways that you can contact me and send us some feedback. The first, if you are listening on iTunes, is to click the review button there. Give us five stars, and then write just a few words about why you listen to She Said/She Said Podcast . Those comments help others who are looking for podcasts like this one to find it.

Laura Cox Kaplan ([35:23](#)):

And I also love hearing from you. You can also direct MessageMe on Instagram at Laura Cox Kaplan or at She Said/She Said Podcast . And finally, you can use the contact link at the She Said/She Said Podcast .com website to send me a message as well. Be sure to include why you listen and what we can do to continue to improve this content and make it even more meaningful for you. Friends, most of all, I am so grateful that you've chosen to spend some time with us today. I hope you found this little investment in you. Well worth it. I'll see you next time. Until then, take care.

She Said/ She Said Podcast is produced weekly by She Said, she said Media.