

How the Media Fell for SBF's Con Game— Again and Again and Again

By Chitra Ragavan

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It's a good week to be one of the biggest alleged con men in recent American history. Sam Bankman-Fried, the founder and CEO of the cryptocurrency exchange FTX which was recently revealed to be a giant Ponzi scheme, spent the week being applauded and coddled by some of the biggest national legacy media outlets.

On Wednesday, veteran [ABC](#) News anchor George Stephanopolous touted his nearly two-hour interview with Bankman-Fried to colleagues on the set of Good Morning America with a bemused smile and a twinkle in his eyes, [describing](#) a "wild interview" that felt at times "like a therapy session."

"I can't imagine what it feels like to go from \$20 billion dollars to a \$100,000 dollars," Stephanopolous said to Bankman-Fried with great empathy and asked him softly if he was "afraid to go to jail."

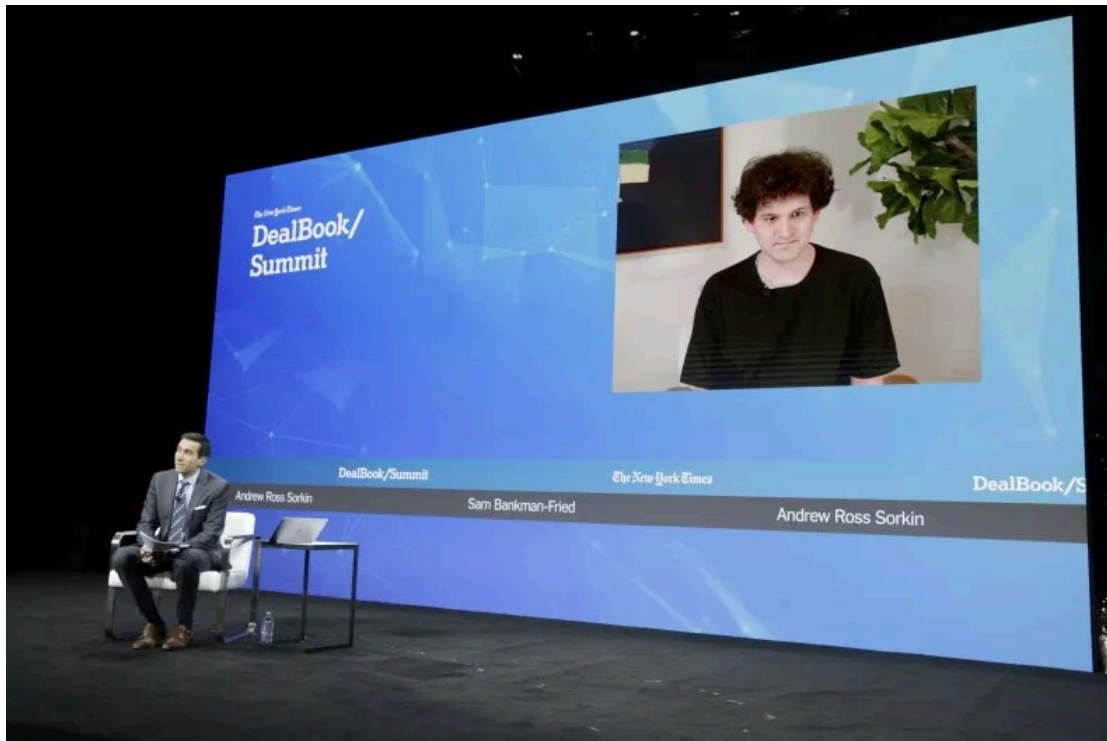


The *Wall Street Journal's* soft treatment of SBF in a [piece](#) earlier this month prompted [Elon Musk](#) to write on Twitter: "WSJ giving foot massages to a criminal."

Then there was SBF's [virtual appearance at the New York Times' DealBook Summit](#), which elicited laughter and applause during a softball interview with veteran financial columnist Andrew Ross Sorkin. The interview was publicized alongside others with figures like actor Ben Affleck and Ukrainian President [Volodymyr Zelensky](#), and throughout the interview, SBF minimized the enormity of his alleged con by acting like a teen who had missed curfew, saying, "[Look, I screwed up.](#)"

Earlier in the month, *New York Times* crypto and fintech reporter David Yaffe-Bellany got "[exclusive](#)" access to Bankman-Fried, in which he also extended compassion to the alleged con artist, writing that he "sounded surprisingly calm." Some of the biggest

leaders in the crypto called the piece a "[Breathless Love Letter](#)," a "puff piece" and "[unquestionably soft](#)."



NEW YORK, NEW YORK - NOVEMBER 30: Andrew Ross Sorkin and Sam Bankman-Fried on stage at the 2022 New York Times DealBook on November 30, 2022 in New York City. **Thos Robinson/Getty Images for The New York Times**

But these post-revelation interviews in which a super villain is being handled with kid gloves are only the continuation of how the media has handled Bankman-Fried for years. Indeed, his media con has from the beginning been a huge success, and seems to be only getting revved up.

The failure to conduct basic due diligence of Bankman-Fried is after all what led to his ability to take so many people for a ride. That refusal to investigate reflects the complexity of the crypto industry and the difficulty involved in tracking the flow of funds and risk on the blockchain. But it's also further evidence of how the media gets hoodwinked by Robin Hood narratives, something many technology leaders have learned to leverage well.

The Houdini craftsmanship of SBF puts him on par with Elizabeth Holmes, the founder of Theranos who was just [sentenced](#) to 11 years in prison for her false claims about the blood testing she hyped. Like Holmes, Bankman-Fried used his physical aesthetic for strategic positioning. He uses his thick black curls, as undisciplined as his trades, and deliberately unkempt sartorial calling card of wrinkled t-shirts and shorts, even when meeting powerful people.



How did he get such positive media coverage and so little oversight? In part by publicly signing [The Giving Pledge](#), "a promise by the world's wealthiest individuals and families to dedicate the majority of their wealth to charitable causes." SBF was famous for trumpeting his commitment to the principle of "effective altruism," vowing to give away

his then-nearly \$20 billion dollar fortune, with highly-publicized donations to liberal causes irresistible to media.

The magic act was successful. A global brand emerged out of thin air. He lived lavishly while being declared a monk. In October 2021, *Forbes* put him on its 40th Annual 400 list as the "world's richest 29-year-old." By the summer of 2022, SBF had reached the pinnacle, landing on the [cover](#) of *Fortune* with a laudatory question for a headline: "The Next Warren Buffett?"

But in building out his brand persona, the crypto Wunderkind forgot the sacred rule of strategic positioning: You must have a solid product or service to sell. And this SBF was lacking. Instead, he had a hollowed-out, incestuous, circular trading platform that bled out from FTX to his sibling trading firm, Alameda Research. It was only a matter of time before the world realized that the emperor had no clothes.

Since FTX's collapse, some editors and reporters have tried to figure out how they were conned. "It was all bullshit, of course, and I didn't see through it," Jeff John Roberts, author of the *Fortune* cover piece [admitted](#) to *New York Magazine* writer Shawn McCreesh.

But *Fortune* editor-in-chief [Alyson Shontell](#) has "[no regrets](#)" about putting him on the cover.

Because the media con, when done right, keeps on going.