

Altercation: Will the Oligarchs Who Own the U.S. Media Save Democracy? Don't Bet on It.

CNN's move to the 'center' is more bad news for news the country can really use.

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Ever since CNN's new overlords at Warner Bros. Discovery chose to replace the corrupt, dishonest Jeff Zucker with the former talk show producer Chris Licht in its top job, the network has pushed the story line, begun by its principal investor, John Malone, that it is moving "back to the center" and away, as [this overly gullible Guardian article](#) argues, from its alleged leftist orientation. Its author quotes Licht saying, "We are truth-tellers, focused on informing, not alarming our viewers."

Among the myriad problems with this viewpoint is the fact that the "truth" these days is in itself decidedly alarming, as one of America's two major parties is seeking to destroy democracy and replace it with the leader of a fascist cult. Licht and Malone seek to move CNN closer to "the center" between one party that is a coalition of liberals, moderates, and few conservatives—and is therefore more conservative across the board than any other allegedly left-of-center party among industrial democracies—and one that has remade itself into a politically empowered lunatic asylum.

There are two primary reasons for this PR push. The first, as always, is money. According to *The Guardian*, CNN earned \$1.8 billion last year. Meanwhile, Fox News enjoyed revenues of \$12.3 billion during the same period. Warner Bros. Discovery is carrying about \$59 billion in debt and is accordingly desperate to boost CNN's audience with prejudiced people who like to be lied to—that is, Fox viewers. *The Guardian* notes, "Rumors have been circulating this week that more outspoken left-leaning anchors and contributors at CNN could soon be dropped." By "left-leaning," we can assume that the new bosses mean pundits who embrace only *some* crazy conspiracy theories, rather than all of them. Those who stick explicitly to reality are likely those on the alleged left-wing "[extreme](#)" whom Licht was criticizing to potential advertisers. (It is not remotely true, as this *Times* headline would have it, that the GOP is a "[party torn between truth and Trump](#)." It is a party where truth-tellers are banished to the political equivalent of Siberia.)

It should come as no surprise that the fellow who is driving this effort by CNN, John Malone, is both a billionaire and a right-wing ideologue. (He may also be [the largest landowner in America](#).) He's on the board of directors of the [Cato Institute](#) and not only [donated \\$250,000 to Donald Trump's inauguration](#), but his companies donated another \$250,000. He told an interviewer: "Look, [I think a lot of the things Trump has tried to do](#)—identifying problems and trying to solve them—has been great," though he voiced skepticism as to whether Trump was

“the right guy to do it.” This position tracks closely with that of Elon Musk, who, poised to take over Twitter, and vastly overpaying for the privilege, recently said that he was leaning toward supporting Florida’s Gov. Ron DeSantis for president; a politician who, as a Republican consultant quoted by the *Journal* puts it, has “all the benefits of Trump without the baggage.” Musk, according to the *Journal*, explained that his support for Republicans was based on the “scrutiny from some Democrats against him and his companies, Tesla and rocket company SpaceX.”

Malone’s closest competition as America’s biggest landowner business is Jeff Bezos, the rabidly anti-union owner of *The Washington Post*, who is, coincidentally, also in competition with Musk for the crown of wealthiest guy in the world. Having a bad year but still active in the mega-billionaire posse is Mark Zuckerberg, principal owner of Facebook, who has also made repeatedly clear his fealty to pro-Trump Republicans and his reliance on the likes of billionaire pro-Trump right-wing ideologue Peter Thiel. And let’s not forget Rupert Murdoch, yet another rapacious billionaire who is possibly more responsible than any other person on the planet for purveying the baseless conspiracy theories that continue to poison not just our politics but those of the U.K., Australia, and many other nations (and who, if justice is to be done, might just be forced to pay for a tiny part of it). And, oh, great news, there’s this TikTok guy, too, who apparently fits the mold perfectly.

Do you think we can expect that a mainstream media largely owned and operated by right-wing billionaires is going to save our democracy from the people who pursue the policies that ensure that they remain billionaires and pay virtually no taxes in doing so?

I don’t. My guess is that the properties they own will keep talking about “the center” as they move that center further and further into territory where someone like DeSantis begins to sound *relatively* reasonable. Just look at the MSM hero worship for hero and “proud” admirer of the man who cheered his proposed hanging, but with whom he nevertheless “parted amicably,” Mike Pence. And not to alarm anyone, but the media is awash in Trump coverage—again—so we can expect more “straight” reporting of lies, conspiracy theories, violent incitement, sexism, racism, antisemitism, and Islamophobia, with CNN and company striving to cover “both sides” of these pressing questions. Remember what ex-CBS chair Les Moonves (like Trump, a credibly accused serial sexual assaulter) said about Trump’s 2016 campaign: “It may not be good for America, but it’s damn good for CBS.”

The Gannett Company has announced that it is getting rid of editorial pages in its newspaper chain, including the flagship, *USA Today*, and “cutting back opinion pages to a few days a week while refocusing what opinion is still published to community dialogue.” This is a move to address a real problem but probably not the right one to make. I have long campaigned against newspaper editorial endorsements. Sure, they make the people who get to give them feel important, and in some cases, they can sway local races. But survey after survey has demonstrated that few people are aware of any distinction between “news” and “editorial” in their newspapers (or newspaper websites). What they do know is that Democrats tend to get presidential endorsements more than Republicans because newspapers care (at least a little) about truth, while to be successful in the modern (even pre-Trump) Republican Party, one has to constantly lie. They therefore equate these endorsements with the dreaded “liberal bias” they

mistakenly believe to be afflicting the entire MSM. What would be ideal is if everybody just published (or spoke) what they understood to be the truth and offered their accompanying evidence, adding, whenever possible, why alleged alternative views were not as compelling. That would mean doing away entirely with the distinction between “straight news” and “opinion.” Good luck to me, however, on that ...

Henry Kissinger has a new book out. The dude is 99 years old, so good for him. On the other hand, literally millions of people never got to grow old thanks in significant measure to his actions. Fortunately, [this review](#) does a fine job of avoiding that pitfall and walks the reader through a bunch of them. Here is one more drawn from my 2020 book, *Lying in State: Why Presidents Lie—and Why Trump Is Worse*:

Nixon’s original hope had been to withdraw all US troops by the end of 1971. Kissinger, however, warned that doing so could result in a period of instability (or worse) in Saigon right around the time of the 1972 presidential election. He therefore recommended that they delay the withdrawal until at least the autumn of 1972—“so that if any bad results follow they will be too late to affect the election.” Nixon and Kissinger required “a fairly reasonable interval,” as Kissinger explained it to Soviet Ambassador Anatoly Dobrynin, between the time the United States withdrew its troops and North Vietnam overran South Vietnam. This cynical strategy, presidential biographer Robert Dallek sardonically noted, “had nothing to say about the American lives that would be lost in the service of Nixon’s reelection,” or about the American prisoners of war who would continue their needless suffering if they prolonged the war. Its goal was merely to allow Nixon and Kissinger to evade responsibility for losing the war once the North finally conquered the South. Naturally, Kissinger lied about this when asked by a journalist, insisting that “there is no hidden agreement with North Vietnam for any specific interval after which we would no longer care if they marched in and took over South Vietnam.” Nixon termed Kissinger’s handling of the Paris Accords to be “a brilliant game we are playing,” as “Henry really bamboozled the bastards.” In this case, the “bastards” were those Americans who believed their president when he said he was honestly seeking to end the war.

Oh, and I always like this quote of David Halberstam’s from his otherwise not-so-great 2001 book, *War in a Time of Peace: Bush, Clinton, and the Generals*: “The singular strength of Kissinger was not just his skill at dissembling when necessary, his unusual ability to tell ten different people ten completely different stories about what he was doing on a given issue—and remember which version of the story he had told to which person.”

One last Kissinger quote, from my forthcoming *We Are Not One: A History of America’s Fight Over Israel*. Here, he explains his sympathy for antisemitism: “Any people who has been persecuted for two thousand years must be doing something wrong.”