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Roger Ailes biographer: ‘The impact could be greater than phone hacking’

Gabriel Sherman on the Fox News chief’s battle to stifle his critics, why he finds the allegations so credible – and what the scandal means for the rightwing media

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When Fox News chairman Roger Ailes was deposed in a lurid sex scandal as the most powerful man in news last month, many expressed surprise and others disbelief. Not Gabriel Sherman, New York Magazine’s national affairs editor, and a man who has most doggedly chronicled the TV executive’s reign.

In his 2014 book The Loudest Voice in the Room, Sherman reported that Ailes had offered television producer Randi Harrison an extra \$100 a week in the 1980s if she agreed to have sex with him whenever he wanted. The allegation elicited furious denials but after Fox anchor Gretchen Carlson came forward with similar claims and other women followed suit, and Sherman continued to break scoop after scoop, Ailes fate was sealed.

Now Ailes, éminence grise to a string of Republican presidents and the taste maker for rightwing media, has been ousted by his mentor Rupert Murdoch and Fox lawyers are investigating allegations of decades-long sexual harassment. Ailes continues to vehemently deny all the allegations.

“One of the things that makes it such a challenging story is the power of [Fox’s] media relations department to control the message,” Sherman says by way of understatement. Fox News’s PR arm, especially under Brian Lewis, Ailes’s head of corporate communications whom he dramatically dismissed in 2013, was notoriously tough on reporters, denying access to any who offended or challenged the boss.

“That’s a reflection of Roger Ailes coming out of the political world,” says the 37-year-old Sherman, who joined New York Magazine as contributing editor in 2008 and joined its staff full-time in May of last year. The late Peter Kaplan, a respected editor at the New York Observer,

who shepherded Sherman's early career, told him "to approach the beat as a New York Times reporter would cover the State Department," Sherman wrote in his book.

Ailes, Sherman points out, worked as US president Richard Nixon's media consultant, during which time he authored an intricate and influential plan to create a partisan media organization that could disseminate rightwing talking points for maximum effect.

"He believes that the network should speak with one voice and that the programming you see on the screen is really what the network should represent and so really, any internal leak is contrary to that and he treats leaks as signs of disloyalty."

Ailes never gave Sherman a formal interview. He did accost him at a party over a story Sherman had written ("This is *not* an interview," he told Sherman), and when the book came out nameless people championed Ailes in anti-Sherman ads on Google and mysterious anti-Sherman websites.

A person or people "very close to Fox News" often anonymously smeared him to conservative outlets including Breitbart, once as "[serial fabulist] Jayson Blair on steroids". The network's anchors have taken shots, too. Ailes told colleagues while Sherman was writing the book: "I know where he lives, and I'm gonna send people to beat the shit out of him," according to Politico.

In conversation, Sherman is laudably detached, even clinical about the vigor with which Ailes tried to shake him off, the same tone he strikes in the unusual note appended to the end of his book about the 614 sources he interviewed.

"[H]e had amassed power by harnessing television to control the images of politicians and media personalities," Sherman writes of Ailes. "And so it made sense that he would seek the same degree of influence over the story he cared about most: his own."

Sherman says that the campaign against him gave him one of his few reporting advantages over the course of composing *Loudest Voice*. "I didn't take it personally," he said. "It wasn't pleasant to have your reputation maligned on various websites – and reading about threats he made against me, that wasn't fun. But as a journalist I just used it as a wealth of material, because he was showing me who he was just by the extreme lengths he went to just to suppress my book."

With his reputation and his legacy in tatters, it looks certain that Ailes will spend years fighting allegations of harassment of the many women at the network, even if Carlson, who has begun legal action personally, settles. But Sherman says the Murdoch family may pay far greater sums in lost revenue than the millions Ailes is alleged to have spent to silence his accusers.

"A lot of people have drawn parallels to the UK phone hacking scandal but I think in terms of the potential impact on 21st Century Fox, this could be far greater," Sherman says of Ailes's demise. Fox News is a wildly profitable fiefdom within the Murdoch empire, with revenue of

about \$2.3bn last year and much lower expenses than either of its less lucrative competitors, CNN and MSNBC.

“The News of the World [Murdoch’s most profitable UK tabloid before he closed it following the hacking scandal] was not a major profit engine,” says Sherman, who has covered the media since his early days at the Observer.

“By the time the scandal hit, newspapers had fallen on hard times,” Sherman observes. “The News of the World used to be the Fox News of the Murdoch empire years ago, but it was a dwindling asset – Fox News is still in its prime. So to have a scandal that rocks it to the core poses a great risk to the corporate parent.”

The scandal is so damaging because supporters and detractors of the network all agree on one thing: Fox News *is* Roger Ailes. Or was.

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The man at the centre of that maelstrom is as mercurial and interesting as any in the media world, Sherman says. Ailes is “a world-historical figure” whose harsh perspective came to define American conservatism in his 20 years running the most-viewed cable news network in America. “I think he’s kind of a historical icon, very much on the level of a J Edgar Hoover; someone who will define their age,” Sherman says. “He transcends the medium of television.”

Contrary to conventional wisdom, Sherman believes Ailes accomplished that transcendence by using Fox News not as a means to advance a particular established brand of conservatism, but as his personal megaphone. “He has sort of contradictory positions that are not necessarily completely in sync with the [rightwing thinktanks] Cato Institute or the Heritage Foundation; classically conservative institutions in America. He’s very populist, he’s nationalist, he’s not for open borders. I reported in my book that one of his immigration plans was to dispatch Navy Seals to the Mexico border with orders to shoot to kill anyone crossing. That’s not a very nuanced immigration position. At least Donald Trump only wants to build a wall; Roger Ailes wants to kill people.”

That minor point of difference aside, in many ways Trump himself is the avatar of Ailes’s philosophy, and now Ailes is his advisor. Trump swept the US Republican primaries not by virtue of his political acumen or even basic competence, but on a wave of populist rage beloved of Fox News viewers but anathema to moneyed conservatives.

“Donald Trump has really repelled a lot of mainstream and conservative Republicans,” Sherman observes. “So that’s really one of Roger Ailes’s legacies: reshaping the Republican party as a populist, blue-collar, white nativist party. The Washington elites and the conservative intellectuals, because of Ailes’s power, had to kind of hold their noses and graft themselves onto

it. Without question, I don't think Roger Ailes is a conservative in the mould of a Bill Buckley. He's unique to Roger Ailes."

Sherman has the New York media world at home as well as at work. His wife Jennifer Stahl has worked at ProPublica and the New Yorker, and his father, an adjunct professor at Columbia Business School, has written the occasional op-ed. His career is a stark contrast to Ailes's own: the Fox News executive worked nearly every job in television during his ascendancy; Sherman has stretched his professional legs occasionally, but he's written about media since 2003.

The writer has interviewed 20 women alleging sexual harassment by Ailes; he says their stories are disturbingly similar. "That's one of the reasons I found these stories so credible," he says. "These are women who live all over the country and the time period spans from the 1960s to the mid-2000s and what's remarkable over that 40- to 50-year period is that the pattern is exactly the same."

The Fox News chairman was forced out this week following sexual harassment accusations from more than 20 women who encountered Ailes over decades

He was surprised, however, by how cavalier Ailes appeared to be during those encounters. "What's remarkable to me is that for a man as paranoid as he is, that Roger Ailes would be so reckless in his personal behaviour," Sherman says. "Because while I knew that he had sexually harassed women in the past, I just couldn't imagine that so many women had experienced it and he'd be able to keep it a secret for so long."

Now Ailes has lost his perch in television – Sherman says he understands that the former executive's non-compete clause bars him from re-entering the media world until he's 80 years old. The consequences of his absence from TV will be major, Sherman predicts.

"We'll see conservative media splintered across the ideological spectrum," Sherman says, and already sees attention shifting to outlets such as Breitbart, the Conservative site that is also avowedly pro-Trump. "That'll be really interesting because Fox was this amazing unifier of all the strands of conservatism together. Ailes used his ruthlessness to kind of keep everyone in line. Now that he's out of the picture, one of my Fox sources joked that inside Fox News it's kind of a Lord of the Flies situation where everyone's trying to kill each other.

"We could see that transposed to the conservative media landscape as a whole."