



'Keep following the money': Robert Reich slams format changes at CNN as politically motivated

By Alex Henderson

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On Thursday, August 18, CNN announced that it had canceled the [Sunday-morning show "Reliable Sources"](#) and that host Brian Stelter would be leaving the network. Reportedly, CNN's new CEO and chairman, Chris Licht — who has said that he wants more "straight news reporting" and less commentary at CNN — disliked "Reliable Sources" and viewed Stelter, who spent a lot of time debunking Fox News hosts, as overly opinionated.

Liberal economist Robert Reich, in an [op-ed published by The Guardian](#) on August 24, is highly critical of CNN's decision to cancel "Reliable Sources" — and he views it as a glaring example of CNN changing for the worse. Reich, who served as secretary of labor in the Clinton Administration and teaches at the University of California, Berkeley, essentially argues that if "Reliable Sources" had been canceled because it had terrible ratings, that would be one thing. But he implies that Stelter was fired for political reasons and a misguided effort to offer "balanced journalism" at a time when extremists who are threatening U.S. democracy have no interest in balance.

"For several years," Reich observes, "Brian Stelter's Sunday show on CNN, 'Reliable Sources,' has been a reliable source of intelligent criticism of Fox News, right-wing media in general, Trumpism, and the increasingly authoritarian lurch of the Republican Party. Last week, CNN abruptly canceled the show and effectively fired Stelter and his staff. Why? The show was commercially successful. Its ratings have suffered somewhat lately, but it was doing better than several of CNN's prime-time shows."

Reich adds that "there appears to be more to" the cancelation of "Reliable Sources" than Licht's view of Stelter's "opinionated style."

"Licht has told CNN staff they should stop referring to Donald Trump's 'Big Lie' because the phrase sounds like a Democratic Party talking point," Reich notes. "Licht also wants more 'straight news reporting,' along with more conservative guests. What's motivating Licht? Follow the money. CNN's new corporate overseer is Warner Brothers Discovery Inc., which now owns what used to be Time Warner, including CNN. The CEO of Warner Brothers Discovery is David Zaslav. Zaslav has been prodding Licht to reposition CNN to the center, and be a network preferred by 'everybody.... Republicans, Democrats.' But CNN is never going to be the network preferred by Republicans. Fox News has that sewn up."

Reich continues, "As Republicans move further rightward into the netherworld of authoritarianism, there's even less possibility that CNN's news coverage will be able to satisfy

them. Nor should CNN even try. If we've learned anything from Trump and his lapdogs at Fox News, it's that facts, data and logic are no longer relevant to the Republican base. Even 'straight news reporting' depends on what stories are featured, which facts are highlighted and the context surrounding the news. This necessitates judgment and values."

Liberal Washington Post opinion columnist [Greg Sargent](#) has stressed that when mainstream news outlets are reporting on someone as far to the right as Doug Mastriano, the GOP gubernatorial nominee in Pennsylvania, they shouldn't normalize extremism in the name of "balance." And Reich, similarly, argues that "straight news reporting" becomes problematic if it downplays attacks on democracy.

"The anti-democracy movement in America, as elsewhere, is among the biggest issues confronting us today," Reich warns. "Is reporting on it considered 'straight news' or 'opinion?' Wouldn't failing to report on it in a way that sounded alarms be a gross dereliction of duty? Besides, how is it possible to report on (former President Donald) Trump or Rudy Giuliani or any number of today's Republican leaders and not speak of the Big Lie, or say they've broken norms, if not laws? So, what's motivating Zaslav? Keep following the money."

Reich adds, "The leading shareholder in Warner Brothers Discovery is John Malone, a multibillionaire cable magnate. Malone was a chief architect in the merger of Discovery and CNN. Malone describes himself as a 'libertarian,' although he travels in right-wing Republican circles. In 2005, he held 32 percent of the shares of Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation. He is on the board of directors of the Cato Institute. In 2017, he donated \$250,000 to Trump's inauguration. Malone has said he wants CNN to be [more like Fox News](#) because, in his view, Fox News has 'actual journalism.' Malone also wants the 'news' portion of CNN to be 'more centrist.'"

On the final broadcast of "Reliable Sources," Stelter stressed that it's "not partisan" to defend "democracy" or "stand up to demagogues" and that "we must make sure we don't give platforms to those who are lying to our faces" — and Reich applauds that statement.

"Sadly, there are still many in America — and not just billionaires like Malone — who believe that holding Trump accountable for what he has done, and continues to do, to this country is a form of partisanship, and that such partisanship has no place in so-called 'balanced journalism,'" Reich writes. "This view is itself dangerous."