



Why billionaire John Malone's shadow looms over CNN

By Peter Kafka

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One of the world's most powerful news outlets has a new mandate — which happens to sync with the views of one of the world's richest men.

CNN is in flux. It has a new owner, and a new boss, who promises to remake the news channel and has told employees to be prepared for “[a time of change](#).”

Most of those changes have yet to manifest. But one of the first ones — canceling its long-running *Reliable Sources* show and [pushing out anchor Brian Stelter](#) — has already unsettled some CNN employees and viewers.

But the bigger question floating over one of the world's largest and most important news organizations is *why* it's changing. Is it because the CEO of Warner Bros. Discovery, its new owner, wants an overhaul? Or is it at the behest of a conservative billionaire investor in the company who sits on its board?

That billionaire is John Malone, a legend in the cable TV business and one who has deep and longstanding ties with David Zaslav, the CEO of WBD. People close to both men insist that Zaslav is remaking CNN because he wants to for both business and editorial reasons, and not because Malone has told him to.

But complicating that narrative is the fact that Malone has repeatedly wished, in public, for CNN to remake itself. And his prescription happens to sync with the new CNN agenda: a plan to steer the channel away from what Malone and others call a liberal bias they say muddles opinion and news. And to shift it toward a supposedly centrist, just-the-facts bent.

“I would like to see CNN evolve”

In November 2021, [Malone sat down for an hour-long interview with CNBC](#), where he held forth on the state of the pay TV business — where he made his [\\$10 billion fortune](#) — and plenty of other topics.

One of them was CNN — at the time, owned by AT&T, but scheduled to become part of WBD, a company that Malone would own a piece of along with a seat on its board. Malone waved away one bit of recurring speculation — that WBD would want to sell CNN — and then offered some programming advice for the new company:

“I would like to see CNN evolve back to the kind of journalism that it started with, and actually have journalists, which would be unique and refreshing,” he said. Then he suggested a model: “Fox News, in my opinion, has followed an interesting trajectory of trying to have ‘news’ news, I mean some actual journalism, embedded in a program schedule of all opinions.”

Malone’s comments didn’t resonate much beyond a couple of places: At [Fox News, which responded with glee](#), and inside CNN, where they sounded alarm bells.

Those bells started ringing again last week when the company pushed CNN media reporter Brian Stelter out of his job. As I’ve reported, some people in and outside CNN believed there was a direct through line between [Malone’s perspective on CNN and Stelter’s departure](#). The theory: Stelter, a frequent critic of Fox News, was let go either at Malone’s direct urging or by managers who wanted to please the investor.

That theory is hotly contested by employees and executives at CNN, WBD, and Liberty Media, Malone’s holding company. “It’s not in keeping with John’s character or style that he would be doing that,” says Liberty CEO Greg Maffei.

There’s also a middle ground between the two arguments: Malone meant what he said but didn’t think he was meddling with his soon-to-be property.

“I don’t think John would think it legitimate for him to give specific direction on coverage or personnel. But I don’t think he would restrain himself from saying what he thinks on overall content. And he probably wouldn’t view his comments as revealing a bias,” says former Time Warner CEO Jeff Bewkes, who’s known Malone since the late 1970s.

What we do know: Malone made his comments in November. In February, Zaslav announced he was hiring TV producer Chris Licht to run CNN and then the organization promptly began [messaging](#) its plans to “push CNN back to hard news, and away from red-hot liberal opining.” And now one of the faces most often critiqued by CNN’s right-wing competitor Fox News is out of a job.

“He’s in awe of John”

Malone is well-known in the pay TV world, where during the 1980s and 1990s he held more power than arguably any other executive or investor. And for a while, some TV watchers knew who he was as well, when he became a stand-in for everything people hated about cable TV at the time. Al Gore memorably called him “Darth Vader” on the Senate floor.

But that was a while ago, and unless you’re paying a lot of attention to corporate media ownership, you may not know who he is at this point. Let’s sketch it out.

Malone, who was raised in Connecticut and graduated from Yale with degrees in economics and engineering, traveled west and made his fortune by getting in on the ground floor of the cable TV business in the 1970s.

In its earliest years, cable was sold as a way to deliver broadcast channels in areas where normal TV antennas wouldn’t work, like the Rocky Mountains. Malone built up his Denver-based company Tele-Communications Inc. into a cable Goliath by rolling up a series of small mom-and-pop operators using debt financing. Along the way, he used his power as a distributor to extract ownership stakes in cable TV programmers like Fox News and QVC. He cashed out by [selling to AT&T for \\$48 billion in 1999](#).

Since then, Malone has bought and sold and swapped companies and stakes in companies over and over, always with an eye on keeping his taxes as low as possible. He now owns a portfolio that includes meaningful ownership in everything from satellite music service SiriusXM to baseball's Atlanta Braves to Live Nation, the ticketing and concert giant. And until last year, he was the major force behind Discovery, the cable programmer best known for reality TV shows like *Deadliest Catch*. He plucked NBC executive David Zaslav to run Discovery in 2006.

That relationship has given Zaslav a powerful mentor. It has also made Zaslav very wealthy, [via a series of giant stock-based compensation packages](#). The two men have been in constant touch via phone calls and walk-and-talks over the years.

“Anybody who underestimates the amount of space that [Malone] occupies in David’s strategic mind and emotional bandwidth has just not followed the last decade,” says one of Zaslav’s friends. “He’s in awe of John,” says another Zaslav pal.

The two men do have very different politics: Zaslav has been a consistent donor to Democrats; Malone is conservative/libertarian whose bona fides include a former board seat at the [Cato Institute](#), the libertarian think tank, and a \$250,000 donation to Donald Trump’s 2017 inaugural committee. (Two years later, Malone had pivoted: He told [CNBC](#) that Trump generated too much chaos and shouldn’t have a second term. “Look, I think a lot of the things Trump has tried to do — identifying problems and trying to solve them — has been great. I just don’t think he’s the right guy to do it,” he said.)

Malone has also said he admires Rupert Murdoch as a business frenemy and shares a political viewpoint with the Fox News owner: “Rupert is sort of like I am. He’s a libertarian, but he thinks we should have a strong military,” he told the [Financial Times](#) in 2017.

But unlike Murdoch, who loves both owning news outlets and getting his hands dirty running them, there’s no record of Malone getting into the fine details of the properties he owns.

Which brings us back to the unusual nature of his pronouncements about CNN last fall. While Malone has previously talked about his affection for Fox News — the US “needs Fox News or something like it. Because otherwise, everything’s leftist,” he told FT — it’s rare for him to opine about programming choices in his own portfolio of properties. You’ll be hard-pressed, for instance, to find him commenting on the music acts Live Nation books for its venues.

And that’s why some people who know Zaslav are convinced Malone has told Zaslav his theories about the direction he’d like CNN to go. And that given their relationship, Zaslav would be all ears. Under that theory, Malone — who now owns a small sliver of Warner Brothers Discovery instead of much of Discovery — wouldn’t need to explicitly tell Zaslav how to run CNN. He would just broadly lay out his view of the world, which Zaslav put into place by hiring Licht, who had produced *Morning Joe* on MSNBC, the *CBS Morning News*, and most recently *The Late Show With Steven Colbert*.

“I am not in control or directly involved”

That argument raises real hackles at various corners of the WBD, where defenders of both Zaslav and Licht say the two men aren’t taking marching orders from Malone — it’s just that they all agree.

Mostly agree, that is: Licht’s supporters acknowledge that Malone’s comments holding up Fox News as a paragon of journalism would be searing for CNN employees, for instance. But they’re aligned on the idea that a CNN that occupies a middle ground between Fox and MSNBC is good

for American democracy as well as WBD's business prospects because then CNN can capture an audience that doesn't want partisan news from the left or right.

The idea that Fox News is a journalism outlet, as opposed to cynical pandering in the form of a news channel that occasionally reports news, isn't worth debating here. But if you needed convincing, you could, say, read [Jane Mayer's piece about the channel's complete immersion with the Trump White House](#).

Or, more pointedly, you could ask Chris Wallace, the longtime Fox anchor who left for CNN last year, saying that he could no longer abide the channel's coverage — particularly the way it treated Trump's 2020 election lies and the January 6 riots. Working as a journalist at Fox had become "[increasingly unsustainable](#)," Wallace said.

Malone, who declined an interview request for this story, appears to have been stung by the furor that erupted in media circles when Stelter was let go last week. In an email to the [New York Times](#), he said he had nothing to do with Stelter's departure, adding that while he wanted "the 'news' portion of CNN to be more centrist ... I am not in control or directly involved."

Malone doubled down on that argument in another [Times story a few days later](#), complaining that CNN had melded opinion and news, and holding up "Fox News host Bret Baier ... [as] a reliably centrist newscaster."

Which, again, echoes what new CNN boss Chris Licht has been telling employees he wants to do with his network — to remove the perception, which he thinks is accurate, that CNN has a liberal bias, and that too much of its programming has become "outrage porn."

I'm with Licht, by the way, when it comes to critiquing CNN's reliance on breathlessness in general. And an early decision he made to tamp down its use of "breaking news" branding for almost every item it talks about is a fine idea.

But arguing that CNN lost its way during the Trump era seems like a misguided critique, given that CNN, like every other news outlet, was dealing with an unprecedented circumstance: Americans had elected a president who routinely lied about everything and whose destruction of democratic norms was capped off by an effort to overturn a free election.

I think it's also important to understand how 24-hour cable TV news operates: Viewership spikes when there's a genuine news event, but beyond those rare moments, news channels struggle to retain viewers. Which is why all of them gin up fake urgency about whatever they think their audience will respond to.

Pre-Trump, CNN's solution was to focus on jaw-dropping but not terribly important events and talk about them incessantly — see, for instance, its [round-the-clock coverage of the "Poop Cruise,"](#) which involved a Carnival cruise ship and ... poop. Or the mysterious disappearance of a Malaysian airliner, which prompted [CNN anchor Don Lemon to ask if a black hole might be the culprit](#).

So if you were cynical enough — like me — you could simply describe Trump as a never-ending poop cruise, guaranteed to create new content daily.

And I don't know how Licht can solve that systemic problem, with or without Trump. And even as he promises to feature more reporting over bloviating, CNN already boasts a strong and well-supported newsroom, which is why it can do excellent coverage in Washington and [around the world](#). I also don't think that Licht is ever going to convince a Fox News fan — whether it's Malone or anyone else — that CNN is now a centrist news outlet, no matter who he hires or fires.

But whatever changes he does make may be meaningful, especially as the US heads into a charged election cycle.

It's possible, by the way, that none of this will matter much to CNN's owner in the long run. Some industry sources I've talked to argue that even though CNN makes around a billion dollars a year in profit, it won't mean much to the long-term future of Warner Bros. Discovery.

That's because WBD has much bigger problems. For starters, like every big media company that makes most of its money from traditional TV, its viewers are departing daily for free and paid digital options. And WBD has specific challenges. Like a stock price that values the combined company at \$33 billion — less than half of what Time Warner alone was worth in 2016 when it sold to AT&T. It also has a huge pile of debt to service, which is one of the reasons Zaslav is cutting projects and staff.

Malone has consistently argued that big media companies need to consolidate in order to reach the scale they'll need to compete globally — and by merging his Discovery with Warner Media, he's already made a step in that direction.

But it's possible to see another transaction down the road, where WBD picks up another asset and Malone's power gets even more limited. Or maybe it simply sells itself to a bigger player and Malone gets out of the business altogether.

At that point, it wouldn't matter what he thinks of CNN. But whatever CNN has become by then will be crucial for the rest of us.