



## A Reliable Source of Concern

By Justin Peters

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Why Brian Stelter's axing is a very bad omen for CNN.

On Sunday morning, CNN's Brian Stelter concluded his final episode of *Reliable Sources* with a show of support for the network that had just canceled his program. "I can't wait to be watching CNN, seeing what happens to it in the future," said Stelter, who had just learned a few days earlier that Sunday's episode would be his last. "I'm gonna be rooting for it. I want CNN to be strong."

On this point, if perhaps *only* on this point, Stelter was in agreement with the CNN executives who had axed *Reliable Sources* after 30 years and precipitated the host's departure from the network. In February, CNN's longtime CEO Jeff Zucker left the network amid declining ratings and several internal scandals, including his own failure to report a consensual office romance with a subordinate. In April, CNN's parent company, WarnerMedia, merged with Discovery; the new entity celebrated the merger by almost immediately pulling the plug on CNN's new streaming service, CNN+. Since then, the network's new CEO, Chris Licht, has been clear about his desire to fortify the network and restore its reputation as the world's preeminent name in cable news. But the fact that *Reliable Sources* was Licht's first target raises real questions about the sort of network he and his colleagues hope to build.

I suppose there were plenty of reasons for CNN to cancel *Reliable Sources*, which was always a niche show for a niche audience. As a media critic myself, I know far too well that the media beat is generally of marginal public interest—trust me on this—which perhaps made *Reliable Sources* an easy target for new network bosses looking to trim some fat. To me, it always sort of felt like CNN was effectively donating the time slot for the benefit of the public, even if the public was not always interested in *Reliable Sources*.

The show sometimes felt like a relic of the pre-internet era, back when media had not yet been disaggregated and mechanisms did not yet exist for regular folks to broadcast their own media criticisms to the world every hour of every day. "We are all members of the media, all helping to make it better," said Stelter on Sunday, and the assertion perhaps explains why the show no longer

felt as necessary as it once did. Even so, the very fact of *Reliable Sources*' continued existence said something meaningful about the role CNN saw itself playing in the media sphere, and about the sort of network CNN aspired to be.

For decades, CNN stood for objective, down-the-middle news reporting in the mind of the American media consumer. The network's pioneering coverage of the Gulf War lent it a certain stature, and it quickly grew a reputation for neutral, credible reporting, becoming uniquely authoritative in the American media sphere. With *Reliable Sources*, the network aimed to leverage its reportorial credibility into honest, authoritative criticism and analysis of the rest of the media. If you trusted the network's reporting on the nation and the world, then why wouldn't you trust its reporting on the media?

The flaw here is that over the past several years, more and more people have come to *distrust* CNN's reporting and analysis—a phenomenon that is at least partially attributable to the continuous attacks Donald Trump and his allies have launched at the network in order to blunt the impact of its reporting on and analysis of his incompetent, dishonest presidency. By loudly deeming the network's output “fake news” and using every justifiably critical story about Trump as evidence that CNN has a grudge against the former president, Trump and his allies have served to undermine the network's stature while attempting to neutralize its voluminous—and warranted—negative coverage of his presidency and post-presidency. “The president said he wanted to give an award based on which network is the most, quote, dishonest, corrupt, and/or distorted, but his problems with journalism seem to be rooted in the exact opposite,” CNN's Jake Tapper [said on air](#) during a 2017 episode of *The Lead*. “He hates that which is honest and ethical and precise. Ask yourself why might that be.” Fair question!

I'll be the first to say CNN could use some fixing. Under Zucker, the network got flabby, increasingly foregrounding less-than-inspiring personalities such as Chris Cuomo and Don Lemon while initially paving the way for the Trump presidency by treating his candidacy as a fun novelty. Then, as if in penance, CNN spent Trump's presidency in full rebuttal mode, and at times the network felt even more addled by Resistance Brain than its competitor MSNBC did. But if it seemed like some of CNN's marquee news anchors were frequently stepping outside of their “objectivity” to call out the Trump administration's mendacities, well, there's a case to be made that it is actually the job of a free press to resist dishonest demagogues who stand in opposition to democratic principles. (Perhaps especially if you feel like your outlet played a role in elevating those demagogues to power!)

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The fact that CNN spent so much of the Trump presidency [pushing back on the lies and half-truths](#) peddled by the president as well as his allies in Congress and the right-wing media says less about CNN than it does about the sheer number of lies and half-truths that came out of the Trump administration. The role of an authoritative source in a time of factual instability is to help its audience differentiate between fact and fiction. If, to take a totally arbitrary example, one politician says the election was stolen and another says it wasn't, it would be a dereliction of reportorial responsibility to simply report the debate rather than to help correct the record. Reporters are

*supposed* to hold public servants accountable—especially those public servants who do a terrible job of serving the public. That’s not bias. That’s just journalism.

The post-merger leadership at CNN have indicated their desire to fix the network by reemphasizing hard news and thus hopefully broadening its appeal across the political spectrum. Sounds nice! Practically, however, what this seems to mean is that the network has become intent on dialing back some of its criticism of Donald Trump, Trump world, and Trump-friendly media outlets—and the hosts and programs most associated with pushing back on Trump are being neutralized or shown the door. Current Warner Bros. Discovery board member John Malone [told CNBC last November](#) that he “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.” In the same interview, Malone, a [director emeritus](#) of the libertarian Cato Institute and a [big donor](#) to Trump’s 2017 presidential inauguration, [also praised Fox News](#) for having “followed an interesting trajectory of trying to have ‘news’ news, I mean some actual journalism, embedded in a program schedule of all opinions.”

This is a very unusual analysis of Fox News’ recent trajectory, to say the least, and it’s an analysis that runs counter to the opinions often voiced on *Reliable Sources* by Brian Stelter, who in 2020 published a book about Fox News titled [Hoax](#). In it, as well as on his show, Stelter pointed out many of the ways in which Fox News and the Trump administration became increasingly intertwined over the course of the president’s term in office. Stelter’s clarity about Fox News’ flaws led some on the right to describe him as biased. Now, the fear is that these bad-faith critiques have found a receptive audience in the network’s new leadership.

“I know it’s not partisan to stand up for decency and democracy and dialogue. It’s not partisan to stand up to demagogues. It’s required. It’s patriotic. We must make sure we don’t give platforms to those who are lying to our faces,” Stelter said on Sunday. It is dispiriting to think that the new leadership at CNN wants to replatform the charlatans while canceling people like Stelter in the name of balance and objectivity. Not only is this shift hard to justify in journalistic terms—it’s also stupid from a ratings perspective, because nothing CNN does will ever win back those people who are determined for their own reasons to categorize the network as “fake news.” The right won’t stop hating on CNN if CNN goes easy on Trump now; the right will just keep on calling it fake news anyway. If anyone will flock to a less aggressive CNN, it is the board room class, of which Malone is a member, which felt fine about, say, Trump’s tax cuts but are smart enough to know Fox News is never going to report things to them straight.

So what happens next? Stelter, in his signoff, argued that the world needs a strong CNN, and I agree with him. That said, we are never going back to 1991, to a time where there was no internet and massive news outlets could command and sway public opinion. We are never going back to a time where a plurality of Americans will ever trust CNN again. That’s not to say the network no longer speaks with authority; it still does. But strength for CNN is not equivalent to capitulation to bad-faith whining, and it certainly isn’t equivalent to mandating alleged ideological balance on its airwaves. Strength for the network is having the courage to be a reliable source for a world that needs it, even if half the people in that world are never going to want to hear what you have to say.