



The changes at CNN look politically motivated. That should concern us all

By Robert Reich

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Brian Stelter's very popular and commercially successful show was axed. The reason? Follow the money.

For several years, Brian Stelter's Sunday show on [CNN](#), Reliable Sources, has been a reliable source of intelligent criticism of Fox News, rightwing 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 primetime shows.

It was cancelled by Chris Licht, CNN's new chairman and CEO, who reportedly was not a fan of [Stelter's opinionated style](#).

But there appears to be more to it than Stelter's 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. 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.

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.

The anti-democracy movement in America (as elsewhere) is among the biggest issues confronting us today. 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 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.

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 rightwing Republican circles. In 2005, he held 32% 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](#)”.

It’s unlikely that Malone instructed Zaslav to tell Licht to fire Stelter. Power isn’t exercised that directly or clumsily in large corporate media bureaucracies.

It’s more likely that Licht knew what Zaslav wanted, and Zaslav knew what Malone wanted. A source told Deadline’s Dominic Patten and Ted Johnson that even if Malone didn’t order [Stelter’s ouster](#), “it sure represents his thinking”.

Early last spring, Stelter [wrote](#) in his newsletter that Malone’s comments about CNN “stoked fears that Discovery might stifle CNN journalists and steer away from calling out indecency and injustice”.

When you follow the money behind deeply irresponsible decisions at the power centers of America today, the road often leads to rightwing billionaires.

Last Sunday, on his last show, Stelter said:

“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.”

Precisely.

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”.