



Robert Reich: The Demise Of CNN – OpEd

Robert Reich

June 7, 2023

Last August, I shared with you with my concerns about CNN’s new chairman and CEO, Chris Licht, who had just fired Brian Stelter and cancelled Stelter’s CNN Sunday show, “Reliable Sources.” The show had 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.

I noted then that Licht had told the staff at CNN that he wanted less criticism of Trump and the Republican right — instructing them to stop referring to Trump’s “Big Lie” because he thought the phrase sounded like a Democratic Party talking point. Licht also wanted more conservative guests.

Why was Licht pushing CNN to the Trumpian right, when Trump continued to pose one of the most profound challenges to American democracy in history? I assumed it was because David Zaslav (the CEO of Warner Bros. Discovery, CNN’s new corporate overseer) was behind the move.

But why did Zaslav want CNN in Trump’s corner? Because behind Zaslav was John Malone, the multibillionaire cable magnate who’s the leading shareholder in Warner Bros. Discovery and 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 said he wanted CNN to be more like Fox News because, in his view, Fox News has “actual journalism.” Malone wanted the “news” portion of CNN to be “more centrist.”

Just before he was fired, Stelter wrote in his newsletter that Malone’s comments “stoked fears that Discovery might stifle CNN journalists and steer away from calling out indecency and injustice.” (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.”)

Soon after I related all this last August in this Substack letter, Licht phoned me. He was furious that I might question his motives. He rejected the charge that he was repositioning CNN to the

right, or that Zaslav or Malone were behind the move. Licht told me he only wanted to turn CNN into a more trusted and less left-wing political source.

This past Friday, *The Atlantic*'s Tim Alberta published a long profile of Licht that's become the talk of the media world. It confirms much of what I wrote last August (along with Licht's angry call to me).

Alberta reports that Licht told CNN producers to downplay coverage of the first hearing of the congressional committee investigating January 6.

And that Licht got Trump to do the now infamous May 10 town hall by essentially giving Trump whatever he wanted. (After the town hall, CNN put Byron Donalds — a Trump-allied congressman — on a panel as a pundit.)

Alberta depicts Zaslav as the power behind the throne at CNN and Licht as his underling. Just before Alberta's profile was published, Zaslav tapped David Leavy, a longtime lieutenant, to serve as CNN's chief operating officer — a move likely to undermine Licht. Several CNN staffers told Stelter over the weekend that they think Licht will soon be out.

And what has this move toward the Trumpian right done for CNN? In recent months, its ratings have hit record lows. In March, CNN hit a three-decade nadir in viewership. In May, its primetime show ratings fell 25 percent from the year before.

In short: CNN under Licht, Zaslav, and Malone hasn't picked up viewers who might otherwise tune in to Fox News or Newmax. Those viewers can always get Republican lapdogs and Trump sycophants more directly on these networks. The only real change is CNN has lost viewers who wanted a clear-eyed assessment of the ongoing threat to our democracy.

Sadly, there are still mainstream news outlets and journalists 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." This view is itself dangerous.

On his last CNN show, last August, Brian 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.