



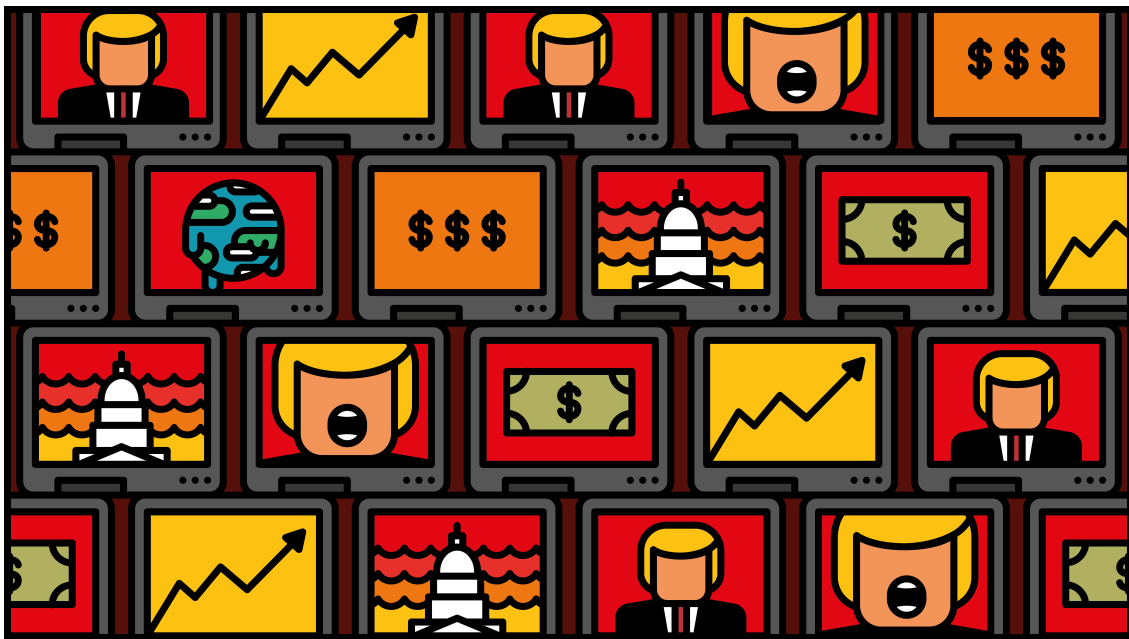
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Week 8 Newsletter: CNN & How We Cover Trump

1 message

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8th Week Newsletter: CNN & How We Cover Trump

With America’s voracious appetite for Odyssean corporate drama left unsatiated by the recent culmination of HBO’s Succession, CNN dutifully filled the void last week with the dramatic ousting of CEO Chris Licht. Installed only 13 months ago after predecessor Jeff Zucker’s own dramatic ousting, Licht, as his own network reported following a disastrous all-access 15,000 word profile in The Atlantic (perhaps, as Greek tragedies go, this is more Narcissan?), is out.

Like any decent epic goes, this is one filled with betrayal (leaks to enemy journalists) and excommunications (demotions to morning shows and mass lay-offs). What relevance the palace intrigue of CNN's internal politics has across the pond, though, I won't attempt to justify. The default state of the American cable-news industrial complex has long been a dumpster fire anyway and it's bad practice to get your fill of schadenfreude from the looming demise of civic society's essential functions, i.e. the news.

But like any decent epic goes, this one also had a calling. One that's been characterized in all sorts of different ways: earnest, idealistic, naive, ambitious, out of touch, a perpetuation of the dangerous false-equivalency of both sides-ism. And CNN's somewhat meta affliction for making headlines can remind us of the essential tension between business and integrity that underlies any modern media climate.

CNN doesn't respond to citizens concerned about the future of their democracy, it responds to investor confidence. It is impossible to critically interrogate any medium without looking at its business model and mandate. There are always strings. David Zaslav, CEO of CNN's parent company, WarnerBros Discovery, was ostensibly sympathetic, if not aligned with Licht's mission to "save journalism" — steering it towards the "informed policy discussion" the country is starving for and away from its tendencies towards outrage and distraction. Zaslav refused to speak on the record for The Atlantic profile, but while his lieutenant took repeated hits from employees and the industry at large insiders, he seemed to originally back Licht. CNN was not meant to be a moneymaker for the company, they insisted, but a "reputational asset" that could "take years to reposition and rebuild," regardless of current "revenue, ratings, or profitability." I do believe that for Licht, eschewing hyperpartisan reporting and instead appealing to a middle-of-the-ground, facts-based approach was indeed a mission. But for Zaslav, that was ultimately only ever going to be a business decision. No doubt, the rating tanks CNN experienced — more than MSNBC, and more than Fox — while avoiding this "all-outrage, all the time" model was part of his undoing.

Many felt CNN's disastrous town hall with Donald Trump last month demonstrated that Licht didn't know how to do this after all, but it doesn't make his initial assessment, that many editors and producers spent the Trump years ignoring his more substantive wrongdoings for his more sensational gaffes, any less true. Any major media executive that tells you they know how to cover Trump is mistaken. Even a casual purveyor of the news can tell you far more about every single one of Trump's taxes, hush money payments, near-miss grand jury indictments, and actual arraignments. But I guarantee you that even the most avid and politically engaged of us can't recall from memory the

specifics of the deregulatory rampage that was his climate change policy. Good journalism should spend its resources elucidating the obscure and complex policies — often made so inaccessible by design — that actually have consequences. Rather than annotating Trump's long dense indictments and having six different legal analysts on every hour for their conjecture on what this means for democracy, give that treatment to the regular reports released by the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). In fact, while all of the media spent this week focusing on the new developments in the tale of the missing classified documents, reports this week found that it is now too late to save the summer Arctic sea ice from melting — something that will translate to real destruction and real loss of life in the way that classified documents just don't. Of course Trump deserves scrutiny. Especially when in public office. But to treat him as some singular evil, rather than as a harbinger of systemic threats, has been one of the immense failures of American media.

The job of a journalist isn't blowing a whistle and flicking up a red card every time he does something else to pervert the rules. If Trump is found guilty, of course he isn't fit to be President. But we have already known this. Perhaps it has the potential to change minds, but nothing about this indictment changes our fundamental understanding of Trump. There are no new conclusions to be formed here. Only eleven-minute segments to dedicate to soapboxes about norms. It feels stunningly obvious, the difference between what's sensationalized and what's substantive. But covering the mechanics of climate change policy doesn't deliver ratings. Trump does. And therein lies the rub.

They say a couple knows the reason they'll break up when they first get together. Perhaps the same is true of wunderkind executive producers with little managerial experience on their resumes who get promoted to the 22nd floor of a major multi-million dollar media organization with thousands of employees and a robust international presence. Perhaps leadership is intricate and arduous and, looking at his resume, Chris Licht, wasn't the man for the job. Or perhaps it's a job that takes time, more than a year and change at least, to get right. Perhaps overhauling the structural ethos of an entire news organisation makes it worse before it can make it better. Perhaps it's none of those things, maybe it's all of them combined. I don't pretend to know. Licht certainly botched the execution. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't pay attention to his diagnosis: something is very broken about the way we do broadcast news and any solution offered that is short of burning the house down doesn't understand the extent of the problem.

Kanika Mehra,
Events Team



Recommended Reading

[Columbia Journalism Review: 'Chris Licht, Chuck Todd, and a tale of two Sunday shows'](#)

[Reason: 'Chris Licht Ouster Shows How Cable News Has Become a Cope'](#)

[Politico: 'The Real Reason Chris Licht Got Fired'](#)



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