



Mark Peterson / Redux for The Atlantic

POLITICS


## INSIDE THE MELTDOWN AT CNN

CEO Chris Licht felt he was on a mission to restore the network's reputation for serious journalism. How did it all go wrong?

By Tim Alberta

Photographs by Mark Peterson

JUNE 2, 2023

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**Editor's Note:** On June 7, 2023, five days after this article was published, the CEO of Warner Bros. Discovery announced that Chris Licht would be leaving CNN immediately.



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Updated at 11:34 a.m. ET on June 7, 2023.

“**H**OW ARE WE gonna cover Trump? That’s not something I stay up at night thinking about,” Chris Licht told me. “It’s very simple.”

It was the fall of 2022. This was the first of many on-the-record interviews that Licht had agreed to give me, and I wanted to know how CNN’s new leader planned to deal with another Donald Trump candidacy. Until recently Licht had been producing a successful late-night comedy show. Now, just a few months into his job running one of the world’s preeminent news organizations, he claimed to have a “simple” answer to the question that might very well come to define his legacy.

“The media has absolutely, I believe, learned its lesson,” Licht said.

Sensing my surprise, he grinned.

“I really do,” Licht said. “I think they know that he’s playing them—at least, the people in my organization. We’ve had discussions about this. We know that we’re getting played, so we’re gonna resist it.”

**S** EVEN MONTHS LATER, in Manchester, New Hampshire, I came across Licht wearing the expression of a man who had just survived a car wreck. Normally brash and self-assured, Licht was pale, his shoulders slumped. He scanned the room with anxious eyes. Spotting me, he summoned a breezy chord. “Well,” Licht said, “*that* wasn’t boring!”

We were standing in the lobby of the Dana Center, on the campus of Saint Anselm College. Licht, the 51-year-old chair and CEO of CNN Worldwide, had spent the past hour and a half inside a trailer behind the building, a control room on wheels from which he'd orchestrated a CNN town hall with Trump. Licht had known the risks inherent to this occasion: Trump had spent the past six years insulting and threatening CNN, singling out the network and its journalists as “fake news” and “the enemy of the people,” rhetoric that had led to death threats, blacklists, and ultimately a severing of diplomatic ties between Trump and CNN leadership.

But that had been under the *old* regime. When he took the helm of CNN, in May 2022, Licht had promised a reset with Republican voters—and with their leader. He had swaggered into the job, telling his employees that the network had lost its way under former President Jeff Zucker, that their hostile approach to Trump had alienated a broader viewership that craved sober, fact-driven coverage. These assertions thrust Licht into a two-front war: fighting to win back Republicans who had written off the network while also fighting to win over his own journalists, many of whom believed that their new boss was scapegoating them to appease *his* new boss, David Zaslav, who'd hired Licht with a decree to move CNN toward the ideological center.

One year into the job, Licht was losing both battles. Ratings, in decline since Trump left office, had dropped to new lows. Employee morale was even worse. A feeling of dread saturated the company. Licht had accepted the position with ambitions to rehabilitate the entire news industry, telling his peers that Trump had broken the mainstream media and that his goal was to do nothing less than “save journalism.” But Licht had lost the confidence of his own newsroom. Because of this, he had come

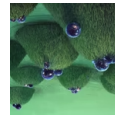
to view the prime-time event with Trump as the moment that would vindicate his pursuit of Republican viewers while proving to his employees that he possessed a revolutionary vision for their network and the broader news media.

Trump had other ideas.

For 70 minutes in Manchester, the former president overpowered CNN's moderator, Kaitlan Collins, with a continuous blast of distortion, hyperbole, and lies. The audience of Trump devotees delighted in his aggression toward Collins, cheering him on so loudly and so purposefully that what began as a journalistic forum devolved into a WWE match before the first voter asked a question. Vince McMahon himself could not have written a juicier script: Trump was the heroic brawler—loathed by the establishment, loved by the masses—trying to reclaim a title wrongly taken from him, while Collins, standing in for the villainous elites who dared to question the protagonist's virtue, was cast as the heel. "She's not very nice," Trump told the studio audience, pointing toward Collins while she stood just offstage during the first commercial break.

Trump could be excused for thinking this was exactly what Licht wanted. The famously transactional ex-president had wondered aloud to his top aides, during their negotiations with CNN executives, what the network stood to gain from this production; when CNN made the decision to stock the auditorium with Republicans, the only thing Trump could figure was that Licht wanted a prime-time spectacle to resuscitate the network's moribund ratings. The two men spoke only briefly backstage. "Have fun," Licht told him. Trump obliged. He demeaned the woman, E. Jean Carroll, whom a jury had one day earlier found him liable for sexually abusing. He repeated disproved fictions about election fraud and suggested that he would separate families at the southern border again if given the chance. He insulted Collins, calling her "a nasty person" as the crowd hissed in agreement. At one point, when she and Trump assumed their marks onstage after another commercial break, Collins politely reminded him not to step past the giant red CNN logo in front of them. Trump responded by gesturing as though he might stomp on it. The crowd roared in approval.

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Licht had not wanted *this*. Sure, he was chasing ratings; in nearly 20 years as a showrunner, ratings had been his currency. But Licht had come to Manchester with bigger ambitions than lifting CNN out of the viewership basement for a single evening in May. He believed that Trump owed his initial political ascent in part to the media's habit of marginalizing conservative views and Republican voters. That needed to change ahead of 2024. Licht wasn't scared to bring a bunch of MAGA enthusiasts onto his set—he had remarked to his deputies, in the days before the town hall, about the “extra Trumpy” makeup of the crowd CNN was expecting—and he damn sure wasn't scared of Trump. The way to deal with a bully like Trump, Licht told his journalists, was to confront him with facts.

Collins tried to do just that. She was, however, no match for the environment she'd been thrust into. Squaring off one-on-one against the country's most accomplished trickster is difficult enough, but this was 300-on-one. The result was a campaign infomercial: Trump the populist champion, slaying his old nemesis and asserting to televised fanfare his claim to the presidency.

“Does CNN count that as an in-kind campaign donation?” the longtime broadcaster Dan Rather tweeted.

Rather's comment was gentle compared with the torrent of criticism aimed at CNN. "Ready to call it: This was a terrible idea," the conservative writer Ramesh Ponnuru tweeted, just nine minutes into the event. "CNN should be ashamed of themselves," tweeted Democratic Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. "This is an absolute joke," tweeted former Republican Representative Adam Kinzinger. "Chris Licht is rapidly becoming the Elon Musk of CNN," tweeted *The Bulwark's* Charlie Sykes.

When Licht found me in the lobby, commenting on how not boring the night had been, it wasn't clear how much of the blowback he'd already seen. What *was* clear was that Licht knew this was bad—very, very bad. Republicans were angry at CNN. Democrats were angry at CNN. Journalists were angry at CNN. The only one who wasn't angry, it seemed, was Trump, most likely because he'd succeeded in disgracing the network on its own airwaves.

I felt for Licht. Having spent long stretches of the past year in conversation with him as he attempted to build "the new CNN," I often found myself agreeing with his principles of journalism. Some media figures had trashed Licht for hosting the town hall in the first place, arguing that nothing good could come from "platforming" a man who'd tried to sabotage the peaceful transition of power. Licht disagreed—and so did I. Trump was the runaway favorite for the GOP nomination and a decent bet to occupy the White House in two years. The media had every obligation to scrutinize him, interview him, and, yes, platform him.

As I'd settled into my seat in the Saint Anselm auditorium, however, I had been startled by my surroundings. This was no ordinary collection of Republicans and GOP-leaning independents, as CNN had claimed it would be. Most of them were diehards, fanboys, political zealots who were likelier to show up at a rally with a MAGA flag than come to a coffee shop with a policy question. These folks hadn't turned out to participate in some good-faith civic ritual. They were there to celebrate Trump's continued assault on the media.

Licht's theory of CNN—what had gone wrong, how to fix it, and why doing so could lift the entire industry—made a lot of sense. The execution of that theory? Another

story. Every move he made, big programming decisions and small tactical maneuvers alike, seemed to backfire. By most metrics, the network under Licht's leadership had reached its historic nadir. In my conversations with nearly 100 employees at CNN, it was clear that Licht needed a win—a big win—to keep the place from falling apart. The Trump town hall was supposed to be that win. It *had to be* that win. And yet, once again, the execution had failed.

Pulling me into a darkened corridor just outside the auditorium, Licht tried to compose himself. He and I had spent many hours discussing what he described as “the mission” of CNN. I asked Licht whether the town hall had advanced that mission. He bit his lip.

“Too early to say,” Licht replied.

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**D**URING OUR first interview, over breakfast last fall, Licht made a point of assuring me: David Zaslav had his back.

Licht was off to a slow start—understandably so. CNN was still staggering from the forced resignation of Zucker, a beloved figure who had been defenestrated for sleeping with his second in command, and the firing of Chris Cuomo, the prime-time star who, in addition to shattering ethical standards by advising his politician brother, had a #MeToo problem. (Zucker declined to comment for this article; Cuomo has denied allegations of sexual misconduct.) Meanwhile, the ownership change that preceded Licht's arrival—AT&T spun off WarnerMedia, which then merged with Discovery Inc. to create Warner Bros. Discovery—had been messier than expected. Thanks to shaky balance sheets, followed by an inflation crisis, Warner Bros. Discovery saw its stock price drop by half within months of its launch. Days before Licht assumed control of CNN, its new parent company announced the termination of CNN+, a streaming platform that had been hailed as the future of the company.

There was never going to be much goodwill between Warner Bros. Discovery and the journalists at CNN. In November 2021, not long after the corporate takeover was announced, John Malone, a right-wing billionaire who stood to become a major shareholder on the new Warner Bros. Discovery board, said that CNN could learn a few things from the reporters at Fox News. "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," Malone told CNBC. After Zucker was sacked, Zaslav, the CEO of Warner Bros. Discovery, exacerbated these tensions by choosing Licht without interviewing any of CNN's internal candidates. Zaslav told numerous people that he needed an outsider to revamp CNN's journalistic practices because Republican politicians had told him they were no longer willing to come on the network—a rationale that worried staffers there.

The CNN rank and file were nonetheless excited by the arrival of Licht, who had earned the reputation of a boy-genius producer from his work on *Morning Joe* and *The Late Show With Stephen Colbert*. But things went sideways fast. A few weeks into his tenure, Licht instructed his producers to downplay the first hearing of the January 6 committee—an event that MSNBC treated like a prime-time special, earning monster ratings that infuriated the CNN staff. Licht expressed regret to some top editorial



personnel the day after the hearing. Still, the incident proved unnerving. Journalists at the network already had reason to question the motives of Malone and Zaslav; now they were wary of Licht, too. When the new CEO began making public confessions of CNN's past sins—which sometimes came across like an endorsement of Trump's attacks on the network—the wariness gave way to wrath. Top talent began to turn on Licht. Rumors of a spoiled honeymoon spread through the industry. By the time Licht announced forthcoming layoffs to his employees—there would be more than 300 in total—in an email sent two days before our October breakfast, CNN was spiraling.

Drinking from a glass of iced coffee, Licht shrugged it all off: the internal leaks, the external media swarm, the printed columns and whispered anecdotes accusing him of remaking CNN into Fox News Lite. “This is too important for me to be worried about what someone’s calling me or suggesting I’m trying to be,” Licht said. “This is so mission-driven and so important. I genuinely am—I get mad, I get frustrated, but it doesn’t, like, affect me. Does that make sense?”

It didn't make sense. Matt Dornic offered to translate. Dornic, who was accompanying us in his capacity as CNN's senior vice president of communications—and, I would learn, as a mainstay of Licht's small entourage—explained that what upsets the new boss isn't harsh coverage of him personally, but rather bad press about CNN's journalists. Dornic cited recent reports about how Jake Tapper's experimental show in the 9 p.m. hour—the slot vacated by Cuomo, which had yet to be permanently filled—was drawing anemic numbers. Licht pointed a finger at Dornic.

“What drives me nuts,” he said, “is *that* has the potential to throw my group off the mission.”

I asked Licht to explain that mission to me, as plainly as possible.

“Journalism. Being trusted. Everyone has an agenda, trying to shape events or shape thought. There has to be a source of absolute truth,” he told me. “There’s good actors, there’s bad actors, there’s a lot of shit in the world. There has to be something that you’re able to look at and go, ‘They have no agenda other than the truth.’”

Journalism was Licht’s first love. Raised in Connecticut, the son of a doctor and a physician assistant, he anchored make-believe newscasts in his basement as a grade-schooler. He studied broadcasting at Syracuse University then moved to Los Angeles, where, after a right-place, right-time chance to cover the O. J. Simpson trial, he got hooked on producing news. With a boyish touse of blond hair and that bottomless supply of self-confidence, Licht talked his way into bigger and more consequential jobs, eventually finding himself back on the East Coast.

It was Licht’s relationship with Joe Scarborough, the onetime Florida congressman turned television personality, that opened the biggest doors. First on MSNBC’s *Scarborough Country*, a prime-time success that featured sharp conservative punditry on all things political and cultural, and then on *Morning Joe*, Licht distinguished himself as a top-notch executive producer, someone known to run through walls (and run over people) to make great television. Mike Barnicle, a *Morning Joe* contributor, nicknamed Licht “Captain Intense.” But the intensity caught up with him. Licht suffered a brain hemorrhage at 38 and began to reassess his life and career. A few years later, Licht left MSNBC to run the morning show at CBS, and then left the news business altogether, joining Stephen Colbert as the showrunner of *The Late Show*.

Licht had a superlative arrangement with Colbert: more money, fewer headaches, better hours. Only one job, he told me, could have justified leaving that life and returning to the grind of journalism. And then the offer came: Zaslav, who had been courting Licht informally long before the WarnerMedia–Discovery merger was complete, asked him in early 2022 to lead the new CNN.

Licht knew “immediately” that he had to accept. Yet he was not oblivious to the challenges that awaited. His wife, Jenny Blanco, had worked for CNN as a producer. He knew some of the premier on-air talent. Both Colbert and Scarborough warned him not to take the job, and Licht understood their reservations. He had watched, over the previous five years, as the network became more polarizing. When I asked Licht what he’d thought about CNN—as a viewer, and as a seasoned journalist himself—while working on Colbert’s show, he hesitated, searching for the words.

“I thought, *I’m having a tough time discerning between ‘How much are we getting played as an audience by Trump?’ and how much of it’s actually ...*” He trailed off.

Licht said Trump had done “really bad shit” as president that reporters sometimes missed because they were obsessing over more sensational stories. Trump had goaded the media with “outrage porn,” provoking journalists to respond with such indignation, so often, that audiences began to tune out. “When everything is an 11” on a scale of 10, Licht said, “it means that when there’s something really awful happening, we’re kind of numb to it. That was a strategy. And I felt like the media was falling for that strategy.”

Licht recalled how, early in the Trump administration, a particular reporter hadn’t been allowed into a press gaggle because of a feud with the White House. During a subsequent meeting with his fellow board members at Syracuse’s Newhouse school of journalism, one of them suggested taking out a full-page ad in *The New York Times* denouncing this affront to the First Amendment. “And I’m like, ‘Guys, keep your powder dry. This is nothing. It’s gonna get much worse,’” Licht said.

“I felt that there was such a mission—” He stopped himself.

“The mission was to go after this guy—” He stopped again.

“Right or wrong. I’m not saying he’s a good guy. He’s definitely not,” Licht said of Trump. “But, like, that was the mission ... Sometimes something should be an 11; sometimes it should be a two; sometimes it should be a zero. Everything can’t be an 11 because it happens to come from someone you have a visceral hatred for.”

I told Licht that while I agreed with his observation—that Trump had baited reporters into putting on a jersey and entering the game, acting as opposing players instead of serving as commentators or even referees—there was an alternative view. Trump had *forced us*, by trying to annihilate the country’s institutions of self-government, to play a more active role than many journalists were comfortable with. This wasn’t a matter of advocating for capital-*D* Democratic policies; it was a matter of advocating for small-*d* democratic principles. The conflating of the two had proved highly problematic, however, and the puzzle of how to properly cover Trump continued to torment much of the media.

Licht didn’t understand all the fuss. “If something’s a lie, you call it a lie. You know what you’re dealing with now,” he said. “I think he changed the rules of the game, and the media was a little caught off guard and put a jersey on and got into the game as a way of dealing with it. And at least [at] my organization, I think we understand that jersey cannot go back on. Because guess what? It didn’t work. Being in the game with the jersey on didn’t change anyone’s mind.”

The new boss told people inside CNN that Tapper’s 4 o’clock show, *The Lead*, was the model: tough, respectful, inquisitive reporting that challenged every conceivable view and facilitated open dialogue.

Licht emphasized certain exceptions to this approach. He would not give airtime to bad actors who spread disinformation. His network would host people who like rain as well as people who don’t like rain. But, he said, CNN would not host people who deny that it’s raining when it is. This was no small caveat: More than half of Republicans in Congress had voted to throw out the electoral votes of Arizona and

Pennsylvania based on lies. Meanwhile, plenty of Republicans who *weren't* election deniers didn't want to come on CNN anyway. Sensing this predicament, Licht had traveled to Capitol Hill early in his tenure, meeting with Republican leaders and promising them a fair shake under his leadership.

What Licht viewed as a diplomatic visit, his skeptics portrayed as an apology tour. The narrative taking hold in elite media circles—that CNN's new boss was a scheming, ruthless Roger Ailes wannabe—went into overdrive. Licht was amused at first. But he soon lost his sense of humor. He called Robert Reich and rebuked him after the former labor secretary wrote a Substack post criticizing CNN. He vowed to friends that he would “destroy” Kurt Bardella, a Democratic strategist, for a disparaging *Los Angeles Times* column. Licht seethed about what he saw as a coordinated attack from liberals who feared long-overdue journalistic scrutiny of their ideals.

“You have a certain segment of society that has had an unfettered megaphone to the leading journalistic organization in the world,” he said. “And at the slightest hint that that organization may not be just taking things that are fed to them from that segment of the population, it must be that a fascist is running the network and he wants to move it to the right ... The fact that I want to give space to the [argument] that this thing everyone agrees with might be not right doesn't make me a fascist right-winger who's trying to steal Fox viewers.”

Licht was no fascist. But he *was* trying to steal viewers from Fox News—and from MSNBC, for that matter. To succeed, Licht said, CNN would need to produce more than just great journalism. Reporting the news in an aggressive, nonpartisan manner would be central to the network's attempt to win back audiences. But television is, at its essence, entertainment. Viewers would always turn on CNN in times of crisis, Licht told me. What he needed to find out was how many would turn on CNN for fun.

From the March 2023 issue: Megan Garber on how everything became entertainment



A CNN studio in New York (Mark Peterson / Redux for *The Atlantic*)

LICHT FROWNED and folded his arms, irritation curdling his voice. “I’m going to tell Don, the biggest mistake is commenting after every single story for the sake of commenting after every single story,” he said, talking to no one and everyone all at once. “Don’t tell me, ‘Oh, that’s horrible.’ We know it’s horrible. If you’ve got a specific insight into something, if you can add something, tell us. But don’t comment on every single fucking story.”

Licht had wedged a rolling office chair in between the first and second rows of Control Room B, a darkened space that featured scores of monitors being manipulated by two dozen people in hooded sweatshirts and headsets. Everyone looked tense. They were 96 hours from Election Day 2022, when they would launch *CNN This Morning*, Licht's first big swing as the network's head honcho, and the show looked terrible.

"I want more movement. Lots of movement," he told Eric Hall, the new program's executive producer, who sat in the center of the first row. "What do I hate the most?"

Hall and a younger producer named Zachary Slater responded in unison: "Boxes."

Licht nodded. "Boxes," he said, referring to the *Brady Bunch* look on cable-news screens. "I don't want it to be frenetic, but please make sure there's movement. We need to see these people."

Making good TV is difficult under even the best of conditions. These were not the best of conditions. Eager to put his imprint on CNN, Licht had started with what he knew best—mornings—and hounded his team to get the program ready for Election Day. Rehearsals had been rushed. The co-hosts—Don Lemon, Poppy Harlow, and Kaitlan Collins—were struggling to gel, in part because they had practiced so little together. (On this day, Collins was reporting in Georgia.) Licht had created this trio, created this new show, in hopes of injecting some flavor into CNN's lineup. He thought partnering Lemon, the opinionated, gay, Black southerner, with a pair of hard-hitting female news reporters could be the "fun" viewers needed. But Licht, I sensed, was not having fun.

When the rehearsal went to break, a collective exhale gusted through the room. Licht leaned back, took out his phone, and started scanning a *Variety* story about his decision to eliminate the CNN documentary unit in the layoffs. After he uttered a few choice phrases—but before we could discuss the article—the show started back up, with the cameras centered on Lemon. He had changed into a white jacket, the collar made of fur, with a turtleneck underneath.

“What the fuck is he wearing?” Licht blurted out. Nervous chuckles echoed around us.

The shot began zooming out, slowly at first to incorporate the guests, and then rotating around the glass table in the middle of the set. “Good. I love that,” Licht told Hall. “Just slow it down, make it steady.”

A little while later, the younger producer spoke into Lemon’s earpiece: “Don, uhh, we’re not too crazy about the jacket in here.” Lemon looked miffed. Licht fought back a smirk. “Why are you guys so mean to Don?” he asked.

The joke wasn’t lost on anyone. Clearly, Licht had dwindling patience for Lemon—his outfits, his ad-libbing, his opinions. None of this should have come as a surprise. Lemon was one of the most polarizing figures in media, someone with undeniable talent and unregulated instincts. Given Licht’s down-the-middle mantra, people inside the network were mystified by his decision to hitch the success of the new morning show to CNN’s chief provocateur. Some believed that Licht had been ordered by Zaslav to remove Lemon from his 10 p.m. slot (Licht denied this). Others sensed that Licht, who had already gotten rid of other “off mission” staffers, including the media reporter Brian Stelter and the White House correspondent John Harwood, would have axed Lemon too, if not for his being one of the lone Black voices on a very white network. Whatever the particulars, the careers of these two men were now intertwined.

As the show emerged from another break, Lemon, sans jacket, took his place in front of an enormous studio display. At the center were the words AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH. Licht asked Hall what this segment was about. Hall replied that Ye, the rapper formerly known as Kanye West, had been saying crazy, hateful things for a long time, but corporate America had never abandoned him; only now, after his anti-Semitic rantings, were companies like Adidas dropping him. Lemon was going to ask: Why did those sponsors stick with Ye after his offensive remarks about slavery and other topics, but choose to bail now over his anti-Semitism?



Licht looked skeptical. “Where would you envision this running?” he said.

“Probably the back half of the show,” Hall replied.

“Do you think if I’m on my way to work, at 7:40 in the morning, I have time to absorb this?” Licht asked.

Just then, the segment began—and Lemon straightaway butchered the opening line. Hall let out an exasperated grunt. “How does that happen?”

Licht grimaced. “Read the fucking prompter,” he said.

After steering the segment by whispering instructions to Hall—“full ... move left ... back out ...”—Licht glanced over at Ryan Kadro, a top executive who’d worked with Licht at CBS and knew him better than anyone else in this room. Kadro was shaking his head. “Way too long,” he said.

“Way too long—and it’s fucking morning time,” Licht said, motioning toward the screen, which had displayed a graphic image of a tortured slave next to Lemon during his monologue. “This is morning television.”

The rehearsal wrapped, and Licht quickly made his way onto the set, cornering Lemon at the anchor desk. Licht gave his candid feedback—some things had worked, but the Ye segment had not. He wanted less commentary. Above all, he wanted Lemon—and the others—to keep things light in the mornings. Lemon looked hesitant. “I don’t want to be preachy in the morning, but I do want to hold people accountable,” he said. Licht nodded and said he understood. Then he repeated himself: The Ye idea had missed the mark.

When Licht left, I sat down with Lemon and Harlow—as well as Dornic, the omnipresent communications executive. Sensing some lingering tension from the earlier exchange, I asked Lemon whether his approach to news meshed with Licht’s. Specifically, I mentioned our “outrage porn” conversation. Lemon squinted at me.

“Some people may want to qualify it as ‘outrage porn.’ But there was a lot to be outraged for these last few years,” he said. “There was a tweet or a statement or an action or something that was outrageous a few times a day for five, six years ... What we were doing is, we were fighting for democracy. We were fighting to set the record straight on us being attacked and called ‘fake’ ... That may have put us back on our heels and made us a bit more aggressive with calling it out, but it doesn’t mean that it was ‘outrage porn.’”

Harlow saw things somewhat differently—perhaps because of her straight-news background—but Lemon wasn’t having any of it.

“A lot of people are Monday-morning-quarterbacking about what happened” at CNN, Lemon told me. “You have to remember the time that we were in. Every single day, we were being attacked by the former administration. And that’s not hyperbole ... We had bombs sent to this very network.”

In fact, Harlow was live on the air when the bomb was detected. She had to evacuate to the street, where she continued broadcasting. It was a traumatic ordeal for all of CNN—and that was Lemon’s point. He had been swamped with threats during Trump’s presidency, followed down the street by menacing figures, given a 24-hour security detail at certain points. Not that it was all about him. What of the unceasing vitriol against women and minorities, public officials and private citizens? It was all outrageous. Was he supposed to pretend to *not* be outraged?

Dornic jumped in. “I don’t think that’s what Chris is even saying—” He paused.

“This is not about you versus Chris,” Dornic continued. “I think his perspective is: Under a normal administration, those would have been 11s. But you had to recalibrate, because if you make the outrageous thing about women an 11, then what happens when he actually does something completely insane and undermines democracy?”

Harlow, now cast in the role of peacemaker, told Lemon that this seemed like a legitimate point. Just recently, she said, she had told her children the story of the boy who cried wolf. She did worry about Trump’s destruction of norms, but she also worried about a lack of self-awareness displayed by some in her profession. Lemon looked ready to contest that point. Then, perhaps in deference to Harlow, he decided to drop it.

As we continued chatting, the bond between Lemon and Harlow was evident. She said her husband had advised her to switch roles only if it would mean becoming partners with Lemon; Lemon said he wouldn’t have moved to the mornings alongside anyone else. Less clear was where Collins fit into this mix. Barely in her 30s, Collins had in a few years’ time zoomed from entertainment writer at *The Daily Caller* to chief White House correspondent at CNN. She had serious reporting chops and a deep roster of sources. Everyone at the network could see that Collins was the future of the brand—a next-generation star who could be synonymous with CNN for decades to come. So why take away her prized reporting post and sit her behind a desk with two co-anchors?

No one really knew. Licht spoke of chemistry and character, of dynamic personalities and geographic diversity. (Lemon is from Louisiana, Harlow from Minnesota, and Collins from Alabama, making them symbolic of a forgotten America that Licht was determined to reach.) But this was mostly game theory. The truth is, Licht didn’t know if it would work. What he did know was that CNN was falling farther behind

in the ratings, and that without a daring move, something that could rouse a lethargic network, the discontent would grow louder. Licht remembered what Joe Scarborough used to tell him: “Scared money never wins.”

Licht was ready to gamble. He asked Lemon to take the lead, trusted Harlow to be the stabilizer, and hoped Collins could adjust in a hurry. Licht’s formative experience in television had come from watching Scarborough learn to check his ego and build an inclusive, engaging, highly entertaining program. He hoped Lemon could do the same.

“I feel like the senior of the group,” Lemon told us, sitting on the set. He instantly sensed that this was unwise to say out loud. “Yeah, yeah,” said Harlow, giving him a look. “But lift us up.” Lemon grabbed her hand: “I’m going to lift you up. I’m not going to try to bigfoot you.”

She smiled politely. “There’s none of that on this show.”

**I**T WAS 6:07 A.M. and sweat dripped from Licht’s nose.

He pumped his arms and legs on a machine inside a workout studio two blocks from the Hudson River. Joe Maysonet, a former boxer who wore polka-dot pajama pants, a green oxford shirt, and a peach-colored beanie, stood with his arms crossed, chirping at his client: “Did I say stop? No, I did not!”

Three years ago, Licht weighed 226 pounds. Worried that he was losing control of his lifestyle, he went all in. No more breakfast. No drinking during the week. No more carbs or sweets. (“I’m a fucking machine,” Licht told me one day, when I asked why he was skipping a meal.) He also found Maysonet, whose gym, J Train, caters to New York’s elite—actors, athletes, business tycoons. On this morning, in March 2023, the CNN boss was down to 178 pounds.

Licht jumped off the machine. At Maysonet’s instruction, he squatted down to grab a long metal pole lying flat on the ground. “Zucker couldn’t do this shit,” Licht said through clenched teeth, hoisting the pole with a grunt.

Working in the shadow of Jeff Zucker, a hugely popular figure who had overseen the highest-rated, most profitable years in CNN's history, was never going to be easy. But Licht had made it harder than it needed to be. Among the first things he did, after taking over, was turn Zucker's old office on the 17th floor—across from the bullpen, right near key studios and control rooms—into a conference room. Then he decamped to the 22nd floor, setting up in a secluded space that most staffers didn't know how to find. It became symbolic of Licht's relationship to his workforce: He was detached, aloof, inaccessible in every way.

The comparisons with Zucker were inevitable, and Licht hated them. Whereas the old boss was gregarious and warm, giving nicknames to employees and remembering their kids' birthdays, Licht came across as taciturn, seemingly going out of his way to avoid human relationships. At a holiday dinner for his D.C.-based talent, Licht went around the private room at Café Milano, shook hands and spoke briefly with each of the journalists, then sat down and spent much of the dinner looking at his phone. Not only did he say nothing to address the group—as they all expected he would—but Licht barely interacted with the people seated near him. It became so awkward that guests began texting one another, wondering if there was some crisis unfolding with an international bureau. When a pair of them caught a glimpse of Licht's phone, they could see that he was reading a critical story about him in *Puck*.



Chris Licht at CNN's New York headquarters (Mark Peterson / Redux for *The Atlantic*)

The negative press had been building—and Licht, whatever his insistence to the contrary, had become consumed by it. Leaks from inside his own house especially angered him. Licht knew that many people remained loyal to his predecessor; some of his top executives, as well as on-air personalities, spoke with Zucker regularly. That hadn't particularly bothered him at first. Over time, however, it became obvious that those conversations were finding their way into media stories scrutinizing his leadership of CNN. Licht told friends he was convinced that Zucker—whose legacy he was undermining daily with rhetorical recriminations about past damage to CNN's brand—was retaliating by pushing hit pieces on him. In particular, Licht felt certain that Zucker was using *Puck's* Dylan Byers, an ex-CNN employee who was pummeling Licht multiple times each week in his newsletter, to foment narratives of a mutiny at the network.

Licht and Zucker knew each other, having worked together at NBCUniversal. Zucker told friends that he'd found it unusual—but hardly threatening—when, a few years earlier, with buzz building around a potential WarnerMedia–Discovery merger, Licht began attending David Zaslav's annual Labor Day party, an exclusive gathering in the Hamptons. Licht wasn't exactly the type of VIP who attended these events. When the merger began to appear inevitable, in the fall of 2021, Zucker got a call from Zaslav. He assured Zucker that his position atop CNN was secure. Then he asked his opinion of Licht. Zucker would later recall to friends that, at that moment, the endgame was clear. Within a few months, Zucker was out, Licht was in, and a cold war was under way. Attempts were made to broker a peace. In August 2022, Jay Sures, an agent who represents some of CNN's top talent, arranged a meeting at Zucker's vacation home. It was cordial enough, but suspicions ran deep between the two men. Both soon began peddling competing versions of what had gone down.

However self-serving his criticisms of Zucker, Licht had legitimate reasons to be wary of his predecessor's approach. CNN had produced some terrific reporting during the Trump years, but it had also embarrassed itself, and the industry as a whole, on more than a few occasions. The use of paid contributors such as Jeffrey Lord and Corey Lewandowski, the latter of whom appeared on air while still being paid by the Trump campaign, served no defensible journalistic purpose. The incurious tone of the network's COVID-19 coverage—its steady deference to government officials, paired with its derision toward those who held heterodox opinions on school closings and other restrictions—did a disservice to viewers. All the while, Zucker's buddy-buddy rapport with the talent bred a lack of accountability that ultimately created rogues. Chris Cuomo smashed ethical norms and repeatedly lied to management about it. Jim Acosta routinely made himself the story while covering Trump's White House, specializing in lectures and snarky commentary instead of questions and source reporting. (One viral exchange with Trump, in which Acosta refused to surrender the microphone to a press aide, then stood to interrupt a colleague's question, came to epitomize the late stages of the Zucker era.) Licht had inherited a culture of loose rules and lax standards. For this, justifiably, he blamed Zucker.

Licht could not, however, blame Zucker for what had become his biggest problem: Don Lemon.

In the middle of February, several weeks before I joined Licht for his morning workout, Lemon set social media ablaze—and infuriated Harlow and Collins, his co-hosts—by asserting that 51-year-old Nikki Haley “isn’t in her prime.” A woman is only in her prime, Lemon explained, “in her 20s, 30s, and maybe her 40s.” This was just the latest in a string of offenses. For months, Lemon had been making the control room cringe with half-baked opinions, irritating Harlow and Collins by forcing his way into every segment, and angering Licht by adding the sort of superfluous commentary the boss had explicitly warned against. Tensions were already high when, one day in December, Collins started to interrupt Lemon during a news report. Lemon continued speaking and held up a finger to shush her—“stand by, one second,” he said—and then, after the segment, berated her in front of the crew. Their relationship would never recover. By the time Lemon made the “prime” remark, Licht was confronting the reality that his morning show might be a bust.



CNN

There was no neat solution to the Lemon problem. Top executives urged Licht to fire him; Licht, knowing it would be seen as a response to the Haley episode, worried about setting a harsh precedent. Lemon pitched an attempt at damage control—a prime-time special on misogyny, which he would host with a roundtable of women—and Licht rejected it. Then, a staffer close to Licht told me, Lemon began telling allies that Al Sharpton, Ben Crump, and other Black leaders would rally to his defense if he were fired, making his dismissal a referendum on CNN’s whiteness. (A spokesperson



for Lemon denied this and accused Licht's team of spreading rumors about him to distract from Licht's failures at CNN.)

The burden of this—of *everything*—made Licht's workouts at J Train indispensable. Licht called Maysonet his “therapist” and “coach” and “one-man focus group.” He was among the few people Licht trusted. This gym was Licht's sanctuary; nothing and no one was allowed to disrupt him here. Except Zaslav. To the annoyance of his trainer, Licht told me, Zaslav liked to call him at 6:30 a.m. Sometimes those calls came when Zaslav was on the West Coast, meaning it was 3:30 a.m. for him. When Licht told me this, he twisted his face into a pained expression.

Assuming a side-plank position, Licht told me that Maysonet “is super fucking liberal” and not sold on his plans for CNN. Maysonet pressed his foot into Licht's shoulder. “Rachel Maddow, now that's my chick,” he said.

Licht rolled his eyes. Maysonet kept goading him. “By the way, you see my boy Jamie Raskin on MSNBC the other day?” he asked, referring to the Democratic representative from Maryland. Maysonet began shuffling his feet like a prizefighter. “Wiping the floor with your Republican boys!”

“They're not my boys,” Licht groaned, collapsing onto his back.

Maysonet motioned for Licht to flip onto his other side. Then he turned to me, his voice abruptly becoming serious. “I'll tell you what I do like about his vision,” Maysonet said. “He wants to create a conversation where we can talk to each other again. We can debate anything, but not if we're not talking to each other.”

I asked him to elaborate. Maysonet explained that after countless hours of conversation with Licht over the past few years—through the murder of George Floyd, the spread of COVID-19, the election of Joe Biden, the siege of the Capitol—he came away convinced that his client was uniquely capable of facilitating a national dialogue on some of the country’s toughest, most divisive issues. Perhaps Licht had spent too much time promoting the return of Republicans to CNN, and not enough time advertising that forum for conversation. “I think that’s the part people don’t know about him, and that’s the part that could make CNN thrive,” Maysonet said.

Licht, now half-standing, hands on his knees, started to clarify that this was precisely what he’d attempted to do with his morning show. Maysonet pretended not to hear him, instructing Licht to go across the room and fetch a large, weighted sleigh. A minute later, as his client pushed the hulking object across the room, growling with every forward lurch, Maysonet mentioned some news from the sports world: The Brooklyn Nets, who had built their franchise around three all-star players, had just traded away the last of them, a catastrophic end to a once-promising experiment.

“All that talent,” Maysonet said, “but no chemistry.”

**A** STUDIO AUDIENCE of Licht’s employees looked on as Audie Cornish, CNN’s top audio journalist, probed her boss with questions that he didn’t seem keen on answering.

The purpose of this springtime company town hall was for Licht to quell concerns and rally the troops, laying out his plan for the new CNN. Addressing a few dozen staffers who sat in black stackable chairs—and thousands more watching from their cubicles, couches, and reporting outposts around the world—Licht stressed the opportunity at hand. Americans were starving, he argued, for a network without

perceived partisan loyalties; for a source of authoritative, follow-the-facts reporting; for a place that could foster a “national conversation.” CNN could be all of that. But first, Licht suggested, people had to fall in line. They needed to recognize that “the brand has taken a hit over the past few years” and unite around his editorial strategy as “one team.”

What made unity so elusive was that CNN’s newsroom had splintered into at least three factions. Some of Licht’s journalists were dead set against him, believing his approach was a recipe for false equivalency. Others were lukewarm, open to a change in direction yet confounded by his ill-defined denunciations of the work they’d done in recent years. Even those who were fully on board—people who had hailed Licht’s theoretical objective for the network—expressed bewilderment at his lack of specifics. He had talked a big game when he came aboard 10 months earlier, but since then—and especially after CNN’s botched coverage of the first January 6 hearing—had largely kept out of sight, leaving producers and hosts to reimagine their programs off interpretations of Licht’s innuendo. His move to the 22nd floor had become a serious liability. CNN staffers didn’t just wonder *where* the boss was; they wanted to know *what*, exactly, he was doing. There was still no permanent host for the lucrative 9 p.m. hour. Licht’s signature initiative—Lemon and the morning show—had become an industry punch line.

Every employee I spoke with was asking some variation of the same question: Did Licht have any idea what he was doing?

Cornish seemed determined to find out. In a Q&A session that grew slightly uncomfortable, she quizzed Licht on these issues and more: the “culture and morale” of the company, the confusion over his plans, the “tough decisions” pertaining to certain employees who hadn’t gotten with his program. Licht began to look and sound restless. At one point, highlighting his recent guidance to refrain from bashing Fox News—and his wooing of Republicans to come on air—Cornish asked Licht about the perception that CNN was tacking deliberately to the right.

He fought a smirk. The network's coverage of the Fox News story to date had been textbook, he said, presenting the damning facts of what had emerged from the Dominion Voting Systems lawsuit—namely, that Fox had knowingly misled its audience—and sparing viewers the hysterical analysis found on CNN's chief rival, MSNBC. As for platforming Republicans, "I think it's incredibly important, if we're going to understand the country," Licht said. "I actually want to hear from these Republicans. And to do that, it has to actually be a place where they know they're going to get a tough interview, but it's going to be respectful."

After underscoring the "fears" people had internally—that CNN was enabling bad actors with a both-sides approach to journalism—Cornish asked him about the company's reputation. She, like so many of her colleagues, wanted to know what Licht meant by that nebulous word: *brand*.



Cutouts of Christiane Amanpour and Fareed Zakaria at CNN headquarters in New York (Mark Peterson / Redux for *The Atlantic*)

“What I believe has happened in the past, to put it bluntly, is that sometimes the tone of our coverage has undercut the work of our journalism. And we’re just trying to eliminate that and win that trust back,” Licht said. “Trust is that you’re getting to the truth without fear or favor. We have seen the data that shows there’s been a marked erosion of trust—”

Cornish cut him off. “Because of tenor and tone?”

“Yeah,” Licht said.

In the hallway a few minutes later, as we waited for an elevator, Licht asked what I thought of his performance. I told him that he looked on edge—like he was struggling to remain diplomatic in the face of questions that annoyed him.

“Yeah. At one point, I wanted to just say, ‘We’re not going to turn into *BuzzFeed*, okay?’” Licht said. “But that probably wouldn’t have helped.”

Probably not. Settling into a conference room—his assistant ordered us Sweetgreen salads for lunch—I asked Licht whether he understood the anxiety that permeated his organization.

“I think wherever there’s uncertainty, there’s anxiety,” he said. “These are journalists, so there really isn’t anything you can *say* that will ease anxiety. You have to show them. So the whole purpose of today really is like, ‘Hey, there is a plan. This is what we’re going to be doing. This is how it’s going to involve you. This is the sense of purpose. This is the strategy.’”

The company, he said, had been reeling ever since the firing of Chris Cuomo, which had set in motion the ousting of Jeff Zucker. “This uncertainty and anxiety, you don’t want it to become the new normal,” Licht told me. “And it has, to a certain extent.”

Much of this angst at CNN, Licht argued, stemmed from skepticism about whether his vision would succeed in bringing back viewers. He acknowledged that it very well might not—or, at least, that it might take a long time. Licht was visibly bothered whenever someone brought up the network’s bad ratings. But, he assured me, David Zaslav cared more about other metrics. Success would be measured differently at CNN than it had been in the past. “This is a reputational asset for the company. It is not a profit-growth driver,” Licht said.

I asked him to define “reputational asset” in the context of an enormous, publicly traded, for-profit corporation.

“CNN, for Warner Bros. Discovery, is a *reputational asset*,” he said, emphasizing the phrase. “My boss believes that a strong CNN is good for the world and important to

the portfolio.”

Even if it's not making nearly the money it once did?

“So I'm told,” he said.

This sentiment struck me as particularly guileless coming from a newsman. Whatever Zaslav's worldview, steering CNN toward the center was a business decision. In an age of fragmented media, Zaslav was convinced by Licht, among others, that broadening the network's appeal to reach an exhausted majority of news consumers was good for the bottom line (and, perhaps as a bonus, good for America). It's unclear whether Zaslav still believes that model is viable. There had been doubts from day one as to whether Warner Bros. Discovery planned to keep CNN; plenty of industry insiders believed Zaslav's plan was to stabilize the network, cut costs to stop the bleeding of revenue, then flip it for a gain.

In any event, the health of CNN's business was but one source of anxiety. I told Licht—based on my conversations with his employees, as well as the questioning from Cornish earlier in the day—that there seemed to be even greater insecurity about the journalistic ethos itself. When he'd warned Cornish about taking a “condescending tone” toward Republicans, surely it sounded to some reporters like he wanted them to coddle the crazy right-wingers who would use their platform to destabilize the country's democratic institutions.

Licht looked annoyed. “We are not an advocacy network. And if you want to work for an advocacy network, there are other places to go,” he told me. “You can find any flavor of advocacy in a news organization that suits your need. We are providing something different. And when the shit hits the fan in this world, you’re not gonna have time for that advocacy anymore. You need an unbiased source of truth.”

I told him that some journalists, myself included, believe that truth itself needs to be advocated for.

“No one is suggesting in any way that we shy away from the truth,” he replied.

“Do you believe in absolute truth?” I asked.

“That’s a weird question,” he said, rumpling his brow.

It wasn’t *that* weird. He had used the phrase in one of our prior interviews, but, it seemed, hadn’t given much thought to its usage in the context of modern media. “Absolute truth. Hmm,” he said, stroking his chin. Finally, he shrugged. “It’s that analogy again, right? Some people like rain; some people don’t like rain. You can’t tell me it’s not raining [when] it’s raining.”

If only it were that simple. A few weeks earlier, *The New York Times* had descended into open conflict after a group of contributors and staffers signed a letter condemning the paper’s alleged “editorial bias” in its coverage of the transgender community. Another letter, signed by a number of prominent *Times* reporters, rebuked what they saw as an effort to silence legitimate journalistic inquiry. Both parties, I told Licht, believed that they were standing for the truth.

He leaned across the table. “Your beliefs can be different, but there’s only one truth,” he said. “And we have to be able to ask questions and have conversations that help people understand what’s happening ... We have completely lost the ability to have difficult conversations without being demonized or labeled. It’s okay to ask questions,



to have difficult conversations. You can strongly believe in something at your core, but that doesn't affect the truth."

Licht emphasized that although he would show employees grace for certain missteps, he had no tolerance for efforts to chill reporting on controversial topics. He noted that Zucker, fearing the COVID-19 "lab-leak theory" was a xenophobic gambit that endangered Asian Americans, had essentially banned discussion of the topic on the air. This was not dissimilar, Licht suggested, to the surgeon general of the United States telling citizens at the beginning of the pandemic that wearing masks wouldn't help them—not because it was a fact, but because the government wanted to prevent a run on the masks needed for first responders.

"They didn't tell us the truth about something, because they were worried about an outcome," Licht said.

He leaned back in his chair. "So, yes, I believe in absolute truth."

LATER THAT DAY, while riding the Acela from New York to Washington, Licht expanded on his media polemic. Specifically, he wanted to keep talking about COVID-19. Like Trump's presidency, Licht told me, the pandemic had exposed the degree to which his network had lost touch with the country.

"In the beginning it was a trusted source—this crazy thing, no one understands it, help us make sense of it. What's going on?" he said. "And I think then it got to a place where, 'Oh wow, we gotta keep getting those ratings. We gotta keep getting the sense of urgency.'"

He slapped his palms on the table between us, mimicking the feverish pace of an imaginary broadcaster. "COVID, COVID, COVID! Look at the case numbers! Look at this! Look at this!" Licht said. "No context. And, you know, the kind of *shaming*. And then people walked outside and they go, 'This is not my life. This is not my reality. You guys are just saying this because you need the ratings, you need the clicks. I don't trust you.'"

Were they wrong?

“They were not,” he said.

For a man widely perceived to be carrying out the orders of his bosses on the board of Warner Bros. Discovery, Licht held some awfully strong views of his own. Certainly, he was under pressure to conform CNN to the whims of Zaslav; Licht told top staffers that he was continually fighting to “protect” them from editorial interference at the corporate level. Licht had heard the talk about his being a glorified errand boy. Perhaps because it contained some trace of truth, he seemed determined in our conversations to map out his own distinct worldview.

Licht insisted that his media critiques were not ideological; that he was rebuking not a liberal slant on the news, per se, but rather a bias toward elite cultural sensibility, a reporting covenant in which affluent urban-dwelling journalists avoid speaking hard truths that would alienate members of their tribe. When we returned to the question of covering transgender issues—specifically, the science around prepubescent hormone treatments and life-altering surgeries—he suggested that the media was less interested in finding answers and more worried about not offending perceived allies.

“We’ve got to ask tough questions without being shouted down for having the temerity to even ask,” Licht said. “There is a truth in there, and it may not serve one

side or the other. But let's get to the truth. Some of this is right, some of this is wrong; some of this is wrong, some of this is right."

He paused. "And I will add, this is where words matter. You immediately force some people to tune out when you use, like, 'person capable of giving birth.' People tune out and you lose that trust." He took another pause. "Do *not* virtue signal. Tell the truth. Ask questions getting at the truth—not collecting facts for one side or collecting facts for another side. Ask the tough questions. It's an incredibly sensitive, divisive issue of which there is a Venn diagram that this country can agree on, if we get there with facts."

Licht argued that the media's blind spots owe to a lack of diversity—and not the lack of diversity that he sees newsrooms obsessing over. He wants to recruit reporters who are deeply religious and reporters who grew up on food stamps and reporters who own guns. Licht recalled a recent dustup with his own diversity, equity, and inclusion staff after making some spicy remarks at a conference. "I said, 'A Black person, a brown person, and an Asian woman that all graduated the same year from Harvard is not diversity,'" he told me.

A minute later—after noting how sharing that anecdote could get him in trouble, and pausing to consider what he would say next—Licht added: "I think 'Defund the police' would've been covered differently if newsrooms were filled with people who had lived in public housing." I asked him why. "They have a different relationship with their need with the police," he said.

Licht glanced over at his assistant. "Now I'm in trouble," he said.

I wondered if he *wanted* to get in trouble—if he savored barreling through the boundaries of mannerly media conversation. It had become apparent, from my reporting, that Licht's circle was small and getting smaller. He obviously felt that he couldn't trust some of the people around him—folks who were loyal to Zucker, or leaking to undermine him, or both. That distrust begot a certain foreboding—yet also a certain liberation. Whereas he was guarded with CNN employees, our many hours

of conversations began to feel like therapy sessions for Licht, safe spaces in which he vented grievances and admitted fears and chased an elusive breakthrough.

I had heard from former colleagues how, in the early days of *Morning Joe*, when the C-suites at NBC treated his start-up show like a joke, Licht had adopted a me-against-the-world mentality, hunkering down and swearing to make the 30 Rock establishment pay for its contempt. It occurred to me that Licht was doing the same thing now. The difference, of course, was that he no longer represented the ragtag rebel alliance. He was the chair and CEO of CNN Worldwide. He was the empire.

As we cruised past Wilmington, Delaware, I asked Licht if there were people at CNN who wanted him to fail.

“I’m sure,” he said, nodding, visibly weighing what to say next. He opted to play it safe. “But it’s certainly a very small part, a very small pocket of the organization. So I don’t spend a lot of time thinking about it.”

Then his voice changed. Suddenly, Licht was animated. “But I would say that for anyone who does want me to fail—what are you going for? Who would you want in this seat? You want a journalist? You want someone who has a direct line to the corporation and can make a phone call and go, ‘Hey, what the fuck?’ Do you want someone who’s done the job? Who’s done a lot of the jobs? Who understands exactly what it takes to do what I’m asking? Someone who believes that our future is based on executing great journalism? Maybe they don’t like my *style* or whatever, but I’m not quite sure what you’re going for—if you want me to fail.”

Licht looked out the window. “So I don’t spend a lot of time thinking about it,” he repeated.

Focusing on his “style” seemed like a cop-out. I told Licht that in my conversations with his employees, they had three main beefs. The first was that he relentlessly attacked the previous iteration of CNN without ever really specifying—as he’d been doing in *our* interviews—what he disliked about the coverage or what he would have

done differently. Licht countered this criticism by explaining that he didn't want to call out particular journalists, especially "when they were being rewarded for that behavior by the boss before me."

Licht told me that bad behavior had been addressed with certain individuals directly. Without identifying Jim Acosta by name, Licht said: "There was one person I had dinner with who was very much perceived as [having] the wrong tone, the old way of doing it. People just assumed they didn't fit in my world. And I had dinner with that person, and I said, 'Can I assume that this was fog of war? That sometimes we do things during war that isn't who we are?' And he said, 'You absolutely can assume that. What do you need from me?' We haven't had an issue."

This brought us to the second beef with Licht: His approach seemed consistently inconsistent. Acosta was spared while Brian Stelter got axed; John Harwood was pushed out because he didn't fit the "brand," but Don Lemon was given a huge new contract and a promotion to anchor Licht's morning show. After disrespecting his colleague and making asinine comments on the air, Lemon still had his job—for the time being—confounding even those CNN employees who considered him a friend.

Behavior and branding aside, Lemon's morning show was *bad*. Hence the third beef Licht's employees had with him: Wasn't he supposed to be a producer extraordinaire? A television genius? How was it that so much of the content he put on the air was so unwatchable? I reminded him of what Joe Maysonet, his trainer, had said about the Brooklyn Nets: Big stars and big egos had ruined the team's chemistry, leaving management no choice but to trade them away and start over. I asked Licht if, four months into the morning show, he was nearing that point.

"Jury's out," he replied.

And then I asked Licht if, looking back, there were things he wished he had done differently. He said yes—"100 percent"—but seemed reluctant to say more. When I pressed, Licht conceded that his biggest mistake had been blazing into the place, determined to prove he was in charge, bellowing, in his own synopsis, "I'm gonna be a much different leader than Jeff," rather than learning the place, including what Zucker had gotten right.

"I was intent on trying to draw a line of difference between the old regime and the new regime," Licht said. "I should have just sort of slowly come in, without making these grand pronouncements of how different I was going to be."

Those grand pronouncements had alienated Licht from much of his workforce. He now realized as much. But, he promised me, there was time to turn it all around. His mission was accelerating. Big moves were in the works. Soon, he said, the world was going to get a look at the new CNN.



A newsroom at CNN's New York headquarters (Mark Peterson / Redux for *The Atlantic*)

“CHRIS WAS ABSOLUTELY, positively, without question the right choice for CNN,” the teacher told his students, motioning toward the man seated in front of them. “There is nothing more important in America today than trust. I’m praying that Chris is successful. I want him to have this job for 10 years. Because anything less than 10 years will not give him the opportunity to make the most important changes to the most important news source on the face of the Earth. I have every faith that he will succeed, and every fear for this country if he doesn’t.”

He turned to face Licht. The teacher’s eyes were watery. His voice was choked with emotion. “My hopes and dreams are embodied in you,” he said.

This was quite an introduction, especially considering the man who gave it: Frank Luntz.

For 30 years, Luntz, the pollster and focus-group guru, had been the maestro of messaging for a Republican Party that systematically attempted to delegitimize the news media. Luntz had no particular regrets about this. Though he broke from his party over its subjugation to Donald Trump, he still believed the press had done as much damage to the country as any politician in his lifetime, which explained his exuberance over the selection of Licht to run CNN. Since meeting him more than a decade ago, back in the *Morning Joe* days, Luntz had become certain that Licht was

especially well equipped to frame the sort of smart, fair, nuanced discussions the voting public deserved. With Zucker out of the picture, Luntz went into lobbying mode, pleading with Licht to pursue the job, unaware that it had already been offered and accepted.

Licht had never gotten a fair shake, Luntz told the group of University of Southern California students sitting in a semicircle in his D.C. apartment. The critics had come for him within weeks of his taking the job.

“Days!” Licht said, cutting him off. Luntz nodded in agreement. Licht told him that was just fine. His boss, David Zaslav, thought in terms of years, not months. Licht had a plan to see CNN through to the other side of its identity crisis—and Zaslav possessed the patience to let that plan work. Luntz winced. He noted that NFL owners were famous for saying this very thing about their coaches—that there was a vision in place, that it would take time—before firing them. He told Licht he was praying that would not happen.

That CNN’s chieftain would enjoy such enthusiastic support from a famed Republican operator—and that Licht would pay this early-spring visit to Luntz’s home, a place where House Speaker Kevin McCarthy keeps a bedroom—likely confirms the left’s worst fears about him. (When I asked Licht if he is a conservative, he replied, “I would never put myself into a category. I think it depends on what we’re talking about.”) In truth, Licht wasn’t here for Luntz. The night before, when the old friends had run into each other at an event honoring Ted Turner, Luntz had sprung an idea. He was teaching a class to visiting USC students and would be hosting them at his apartment the next day; what if Licht made a surprise appearance to answer their questions about the media?

Most executives would never entertain such a haphazard scheduling request. To his credit, Licht—now very much in the barrel at CNN, rumors about job security shadowing his every move—did so and then some. The next day, he showed up at Luntz’s apartment and spent an hour with the group of 16 students. It struck me, yet again, as exactly the type of open interaction he’d been avoiding with his own employees. With the students, Licht was blunt and authentic to a fault; once, during a word-association game, when a young woman called CNN “liberal,” Licht made no effort to mask his irritation, quizzing her for specifics until she admitted defeat, confessing that her answer was more about perception than reality.

One of her classmates raised his hand. He asked Licht how CNN could recover from being the face of “fake news.” Licht replied that the network needed to “double down” on a facts-only approach. “It’s so easy to ruin a reputation—and it just takes a lot of time to win it back,” he said. Licht told the students that his organization had little margin for error: Every story on the CNN website, every chyron on the airwaves, every comment on his reporters’ social-media accounts was going to be scrutinized.

“It all matters,” he said. “Because the second you give ammunition to the other side, they exploit it.”

And then Licht said something I’d never heard before. “I don’t want people to think of CNN, Fox, and MSNBC in the same sentence,” he said.

Licht told students that MSNBC was using the all-outrage, all-the-time model that CNN had invented; “one show in particular,” he noted, seemed to use a **BREAKING NEWS** banner on virtually every segment. (He was referring to Nicolle Wallace’s program at 4 p.m., a competitor to Jake Tapper’s show in that time slot.) That tactic produces a bump in ratings, Licht said—but he called it irresponsible on the part of his former employer.

He was—justifiably, but still surprisingly—much harder on Fox News. After all, Licht had repeatedly warned his staff not to “get over their skis” while covering Rupert Murdoch’s network. He stressed that they were “not in the business of freaking out over everything Laura Ingraham says,” because “it’s not news.” What we were witnessing now, Licht said, *was* news. Tucker Carlson had been trashing Trump in text messages while providing him cover in prime time. Ingraham and Sean Hannity had dismissed the election-fraud crusade in private while selling it to the base. In fact, the evidence that had emerged from the Dominion lawsuit showed that “a major media organization was knowingly misleading people, and it had actual real-world consequences,” Licht said.

Using this example, Licht sought to differentiate CNN from both networks—slamming Fox News for being a duplicitous propaganda outfit, and rebuking MSNBC for trafficking in hysteria. “If every day we were hammering Fox, it all sounds like noise,” Licht told the students. “But if you’re watching CNN right now, you’re going, ‘Wow, this is actually important, because they never talk about Fox.’”

Right on cue, one of Luntz’s students asked Licht about the trap of false equivalency. She seemed less interested in litigating the respective crimes of Fox News and MSNBC—though that played into her question—and more concerned with Licht’s overall attitude toward the news. There is, she reminded him, “one truth” on some fundamental questions facing the country. Trump had lost the 2020 election; Barack Obama had been born in the United States; we know how many deaths have been caused by COVID.

Licht pounced. “Wait a second. We don’t know how many deaths there were from COVID,” he said.

She frowned at him.

“No, really, we don’t,” Licht said. As the son of a doctor, he believed there were “legitimate conversations” to be had about the death toll attached to COVID-19.



Perhaps some patients had been admitted to hospitals with life-threatening illnesses before the pandemic began, then died with a positive diagnosis, Licht postulated. “Where we run into trouble is when you say, ‘No. Come on. We’re not even having that conversation,’” he told the students. “That goes to trust as much as anything else. If you’re solid on your facts, then you should be able to entertain that discussion.”

Licht conceded that mollifying the right with a both-sides approach was “the biggest concern in my own organization.” But he wasn’t backing down. It had been unfair, he said, to paint everyone who had questions about the accuracy of death counts as “COVID deniers.” It was dishonest to frame the final pandemic-era bailout as “You’re either for this rescue bill, or you hate poor people.” He gave them his favorite analogy: We can debate whether we like rain or we don’t like rain, as long as we acknowledge when it’s raining outside.

The final question was straightforward. A young woman asked Licht how, given his harsh critiques of CNN’s past performance, the network planned to cover Trump this time around.

“I get asked that question all the time,” Licht said, looking bemused. “I will give you a very counterintuitive answer, which is: I am *so* not concerned about that.” He explained that Trump was now a recycled commodity; that his “superpower” of dominating the news cycle was a thing of the past. If anything, Licht added, he would love to get Trump on the air alongside his ace reporter Kaitlan Collins.

The students appeared startled by his nonchalance.

“You cover him like any other candidate,” Licht told them.

**T**HE NEXT TIME I saw Licht was two months later in Manchester.

The CNN newsroom had been stunned by the news of the May 10 town hall. Internally, questions about whether the network would platform Trump in the run-up to the 2024 campaign had felt very much unanswered. Almost no one—not even CNN’s leading talent, people who had long-standing relationships with Trump and his top aides—knew about the negotiations to host a town hall. When it was announced, Licht made a forceful argument to his employees about the merits of a live event. The campaign was under way; Trump was the front-runner and needed to be covered. Rather than giving him unfiltered access to their viewers via rallies, Licht said, CNN could control the presentation of Trump with its production decisions, its questioning, its live fact-checking. To varying degrees, his skeptics told me, they bought in.

But anxieties grew as the town hall approached. Employees found it strange that none of the CNN anchors who’d interviewed Trump—Anderson Cooper, Jake Tapper, Erin Burnett, Wolf Blitzer, Chris Wallace—was invited to play a role in preparing for the

event, whether by shaping questions, suggesting best practices, or simply advising Collins. Trump speculated on social media about the town hall turning into a disaster, prompting fears among executives that he might stage a stunt by walking off the set, which in turn prompted fears among staffers about what, exactly, the network would do to *keep* Trump on the set. In the final days before the event, concerns about the audience makeup spiked as Licht's description of the crowd—"extra Trumpy"—wound its way through Slack channels and text-message threads.

All of these concerns, it turned out, were warranted. Preparation was clearly an issue. Collins did an admirable job but was steamrolled by Trump in key moments; her questions, which came almost entirely from the candidate's ideological left, served to effectively rally the room around him. Not that the room needed rallying: The crowd was overwhelmingly pro-Trump, and because CNN wanted an organic environment, it placed few restrictions on engagement. The ensuing rounds of whole-audience applause—I counted at least nine—disrupted Collins's rhythm as an interviewer. So did the ill-timed bouts of laughter, such as when Trump mocked E. Jean Carroll, and the jeering that accompanied Collins's mention of the *Access Hollywood* tape. By the end of the event, it was essentially indistinguishable from a MAGA rally. People throughout the room shouted, "I love you!" during commercial breaks and chanted "Four more years!" when the program ended.



CNN

As attendees emptied into the lobby, it felt as though fans were celebrating the home team's victory over a hated rival. People I talked with lauded Trump and loathed CNN in equal proportion. Christopher Ager, the state party chair, captured their sentiments best: "We knew that CNN had new leadership. It seemed like they had a different tone, like they were going to be fair to Trump, fair to Republicans. But I didn't see that tonight," he said. "This was the old CNN."

Two hundred fifty miles away, on the set in New York, CNN staffers were perplexed. The initial plan had called for Scott Jennings, a Republican who is less than enamored of Trump, to join his familiar grouping of pundits on the postgame show. CNN had flown Jennings to New York for the occasion. However, hours before the town hall, a switch was announced internally: Byron Donalds would be substituted for Jennings (who wound up coming on the air with another panel much later that night). Donalds, a Republican congressman from Florida, is an election denier—someone who, to use Licht's language, says it's not raining in the middle of a downpour. It was enough of a problem for some CNN staffers that Trump, the original election denier, was flouting Licht's oft-repeated standard. But why was *Donalds* on CNN's postgame panel?

This wasn't the only peculiar personnel move. Sarah Matthews, a Trump-administration official who'd turned critical of her former boss, had been slated to appear on the pregame show. But she was abruptly nixed in favor of Hogan Gidley, a former White House staffer who remained devoted to Trump.

Live television is a volatile thing. People and sets and scripts are always being changed for all kinds of reasons. Still, CNN employees had reason to be suspicious. They wondered if some sort of deal had been cut with Trump's team, promising the placement of approved panelists in exchange for his participation in the town hall. At the least, even absent some official agreement, it seemed obvious that CNN leaders had been contorting the coverage to keep Trump happy—perhaps to prevent him from walking offstage. At one point during the pregame show, when the words *SEXUAL ABUSE* appeared on the CNN chyron, one of Licht's lieutenants phoned the control room. His instructions stunned everyone who overheard them: The chyron needed to come down immediately.

When the town hall ended, two postgame panels kicked off concurrently, giving network executives the flexibility to switch between reporting and analysis. One panel, anchored by Tapper, was a roundtable of journalists picking apart Trump's lies. The other, led by Cooper, featured partisan pundits—including Donalds—debating one another. According to the mission that Licht had articulated for me, Tapper's panel should have starred that night. But it didn't. Licht made the call to elevate Cooper's panel (a fact first reported by *Puck*). This decision may or may not have come from the *very* top: In the days after the town hall, Zaslav told multiple people that Tapper's Trump-bashing panel reminded him of Zucker's CNN. Yet even that MAGA-friendly version wasn't good enough for Donalds. After criticizing the network on-air, the congressman stepped off the set and then, in full view of the crew as well as his fellow panelists, grabbed his phone and started blasting CNN on Twitter.

Licht was still coming to terms with the ferocity of the backlash later that night when CNN's popular *Reliable Sources* newsletter landed in his inbox. He read the opening

line in disbelief: “It’s hard to see how America was served by the spectacle of lies that aired on CNN Wednesday evening,” Licht’s own media reporter, Oliver Darcy, wrote.

Licht could handle being ridiculed by his media rivals. But being publicly scolded by someone on his own payroll—on the biggest night of his career—felt like a new level of betrayal. Licht, who just hours earlier had expressed ambivalence to me about how the event played, went into war mode.

The next morning, he began the 9 o’clock editorial call with a telling choice of words: “I absolutely, unequivocally believe America was served very well by what we did last night.”

**L**OTS OF CNN EMPLOYEES on that morning call disagreed with Licht. They thought his execution of the event had been dreadful; they believed his tactical decisions had essentially ceded control of the town hall to Trump, put Collins in an impossible position, and embarrassed everyone involved with the production. These opinions were widely held—and almost entirely irrelevant. Everyone at CNN had long ago come to realize that Licht was playing for an audience of one. It didn’t matter what they thought, or what other journalists thought, or even what viewers thought. What mattered was what David Zaslav thought.

I was looking forward to finding out. For months, Zaslav’s head of communications, Nathaniel Brown, had been shielding his boss from participating in this story. He first told me that Zaslav would speak to me only without attribution, and any quotes I wanted to use would be subject to their approval. When I refused—telling Brown that quote approval was out of the question, and that I would meet Zaslav only if he allowed on-the-record questioning—he reluctantly agreed to my terms, but then tried running out the clock, repeatedly making Zaslav unavailable for an interview. Finally, after false starts and a painstaking back-and-forth, the interview was set. I would meet Zaslav on Wednesday, May 17—one week after the Trump town hall—at his office in New York.

On Tuesday evening, less than 24 hours before that meeting, Brown called me. “We’re going to keep this on background only, nothing for attribution,” he said. This was a brazen renege on our agreement, and Brown knew it. He claimed that it was out of his hands. But, Brown tried reassuring me, “with everything going on,” Zaslav thought “he could be most helpful to you by explaining some things on background.”

I wasn’t entirely surprised. Over the previous year, people who knew Zaslav—and who had observed his relationship with Licht—had depicted him as a control freak, a micromanager, a relentless operator who helicoptered over his embattled CNN leader. Zaslav’s constant meddling in editorial decisions struck network veterans as odd and inappropriate; even stranger was his apparent marionetting of Licht. In this sense, some of Licht’s longtime friends and co-workers told me, they pitied him. He was the

one getting mauled while the man behind the curtain suffered nary a scratch. I declined Brown's offer. I told him this was Zaslav's last chance to make the case for Licht's leadership—and his own. If he wanted to explain things, he could do so on the record, as we had agreed. Zaslav refused.

The night before the publication of this story, Zaslav sent a statement through Brown saying “while we know that it will take time to complete the important work that’s underway, we have great confidence in the progress that Chris and the team are making and share their conviction in the strategy.” Brown also offered his own statement alongside it, saying that he’d only canceled our on-record interview because “it became clear over a period of months between the initial request and the planned meeting that the premise of that meeting had changed.” (It had not; in an email two days before the scheduled meeting, Brown had written that they would see me Wednesday for an “on record” conversation.)

The day after that canceled meeting, I sat down with Licht for the final time, at a restaurant overlooking Hudson Yards. I told him about the perception that Zaslav doesn't let him do his job. Licht looked temporarily frozen.

“I don't feel that at all,” he said. “I feel like I have someone who's a great partner, who has my back and knows a lot about this business.”

“Do you feel like you've been able to be yourself on this job?” I asked.

“Where does that question come from? What are you getting at? Like, *myself*?” he asked, looking incredulous. Licht chewed on his lip for a moment. “I think it's very different—a CEO job is just very different. Every word you say is parsed. Every way you look at someone is parsed. It's just different. So I try to be as much of my authentic self as possible within the natural confines of the job.”

I explained where the question was coming from. People at CNN think he's “performative,” I told Licht, as though he's projecting this persona of a bulletproof badass because that's what Zaslav wants to see. His staffers also think he's become so bent on selling this image that it's crushed his ability to build real, meaningful relationships with key people there who want him to succeed.

CNN employees had asked me, again and again, to probe for some humility in their leader. If nothing else, they wanted some morsel of self-awareness. They hoped to see that he knew how poorly his tenure was playing out, and why. But Licht would not bite. At one point, I asked him whether he regretted moving his office to the 22nd floor. Licht sat in silence for more than a minute—cracking his neck, glancing around, appearing at one point as though he might not answer the question at all.

Finally, he exhaled heavily. “I didn't mean for it to become a thing. And it became a thing. So, sure.”

“Only because it became a thing?” I asked.

“*Sure*,” he replied.

Licht wasn't going to give me—or, more accurately, his employees—the satisfaction of admitting this error. He certainly wasn't going to acknowledge everything else that had gone wrong. Even with CNN falling behind Newsmax in the ratings two nights after the town hall, Licht was unperturbed. Even with his employees in open revolt—a week after Darcy's newsletter, *Christiane Amanpour*, perhaps the most accomplished journalist in CNN's history, chided Licht in a speech at Columbia's journalism school—he was staying the course.



Chris Licht observes a broadcast (Mark Peterson / Redux for *The Atlantic*)

I asked Licht whether there was *anything* he regretted about the event. The “extra Trumpy” makeup of the crowd? (No, Licht said, because it was representative of the Republican base.) Devoting the first question to his election lies? (No, Licht said, because nothing else, not even the E. Jean Carroll verdict, was as newsworthy as Trump's assault on the ballot box.) Allowing the audience to cheer at will? (No, Licht said, because instructing them to hold their applause, as debate moderators regularly do, would have altered the reality of the event.) The lone point he ceded was that the crowd should have been introduced to viewers at home—with a show of hands,

perhaps, to demonstrate how many had voted for Trump previously, or were planning to support him in 2024.

He gave no ground on anything else—not even the presence of Representative Donalds on the postgame show. Licht told me it probably didn't make sense to seat a congressman on the pundits' panel, but said he otherwise had no regrets, even after I pointed out that Donalds was an election denier who used his place on that panel to question the legitimacy of Joe Biden's victory in 2020.

Had CNN struck a deal with Trump's team, I asked, that required seating guests like Donalds and Gidley?

"Absolutely not," Licht replied. "I can unequivocally say there was no agreement, no deal. Nothing."

I shared with him a more popular theory of what had gone down. Lots of CNN employees believed there'd been no formal agreement, but rather an understanding: If Trump showed good faith in coming on CNN, the network needed to show good faith in booking some *unusually* pro-Trump voices for the pregame and postgame shows. I noted to Licht that many of his people believed this would have been agreed to without his knowledge, because he was focused on the bigger picture of producing the town hall. Was it possible, I asked, that his lieutenants might have reached that understanding with Trump's team?

"Nnnno," he said, dragging out the word, buying himself some time. "But I can—I mean, anything's possible. But I would imagine it's more along the lines of 'If we are completely one-sided in our analysis, then that doesn't serve the audience.'" He paused. "Like, [one] of the biggest misconceptions about that town hall is that I did it for ratings. It's a rented audience"—that is, most viewers were not CNN regulars—"so I didn't do it for ratings. I certainly didn't do it for a profit, because it cost us money. And I certainly didn't do it to build a relationship with Trump. So that would by definition preclude a lot of the conspiracy-theory dealmaking."

Maybe it was a conspiracy theory. But over the past year, so many things that Licht's employees had predicted—speculation he'd dismissed as wrong or shortsighted or unhinged—had proved true. Lemon *was* a disaster on the morning show. (Licht finally fired him in April.) Collins *wasn't* better co-anchoring in New York than starring at the White House. (Licht gave her the 9 o'clock hour beginning this summer.) Licht *had* been fixated on the negative press about him. (He confronted Dylan Byers at a party in March, Licht admitted to me, and raged at the reporter about his coverage.) Zaslav *did* turn out to be comically intrusive. (In one incident, a day after the *New York Post* reported that Licht might soon be fired, Zaslav dropped into a CNN managerial meeting and declared to Licht's underlings, "This is our rendezvous with destiny!")

Licht had told me that he and Zaslav figured the “gut renovation” of CNN would require two years of work. But there was reason to believe that timeline was accelerating: Not long after our final interview, Warner Bros. Discovery announced the installation of CNN’s new chief operating officer, David Leavy, a Zaslav confidant whose hiring fueled talk of an imminent power struggle—and potentially, the beginning of the end for Licht.

In fairness, Jeff Zucker’s first few years at CNN were also brutal. There were layoffs and programming flops, and viewership was in decline. It wasn’t until Zucker found a rhythm with what CNN staff called his “swarm strategy,” which threw reporting resources at the hottest trending stories—disappearing planes, the “Poop Cruise,” and, ultimately, Trump’s candidacy—that CNN became a ratings behemoth. Licht’s poor start did not preclude a comeback. There was, he and his stalwarts told me, still time for him to be successful.

And yet, little in Licht’s first-year record indicated that success was on the way. His biggest achievement—luring Charles Barkley and Gayle King to co-host a show—was hardly going to revive CNN’s prime-time lineup. The program, “King Charles,” would air only once a week, leaving Licht still in search of the win he needed to juice CNN’s ratings—and perhaps save his job.

Near the end of our interview, I asked Licht to put himself in my shoes. If he were me, could he possibly write a positive profile of CNN’s leader?

He spent a long time in silence. “Absolutely,” Licht finally said.

If the answer was “absolutely,” I asked, why did he need so long to think about it?

“I wanted to be very sure,” he replied.

This was not the same man I’d met a year earlier. Once certain that he could tame Trump single-handedly, Licht still tried to act the part of an indomitable CEO. Yet he was now stalked by self-doubt. That much was understandable: Licht lived on an island, surrounded by people who disliked him, or doubted his vision for the company, or questioned his competency, or were outright rooting for his ruin. He had hoped the Trump town hall would make believers out of his critics. Instead, it turned his few remaining believers into critics. I had never witnessed a lower tide of confidence inside any company than in the week following the town hall at CNN. Some staffers held off-site meetings openly discussing the merits of quitting en masse. Many began reaching out to rival media organizations about job openings. More than a few called Jeff Zucker, their former boss, desperate for his counsel.

As we sipped our coffee, Licht tried to sound unflappable.



“I don’t need people to be loyal to Chris Licht. I need people to be loyal to CNN,” he said.

The only person whose loyalty he needed, I pointed out, was Zaslav.

Licht nodded slowly, saying nothing. Then, just as he started to speak, his wrist began buzzing and flashing. Licht glanced down at his smartwatch. Zaslav was calling him. He looked up at me. Seeing that I’d noticed, Licht allowed a laugh—a genuine laugh—then stood up from the table and answered his phone.

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*This story has been updated to incorporate details of a statement from David Zaslav and his spokesperson.*

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Tim Alberta is a staff writer at *The Atlantic*.

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