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Reporter's dismissal exposes political pressures on West Virginia Public Broadcasting

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David Folkenflik

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West Virginia Public Broadcasting dismissed part-time reporter Amelia Ferrell Knisely after she covered allegations of the mistreatment of people with disabilities in the state's care. Knisely (left) is shown reporting in this 2021 photograph.

F. Brian Ferguson/Report for America

Late last fall, West Virginia Public Broadcasting's Amelia Ferrell Knisely reported one story after another about allegations that people with disabilities were abused in facilities run by the state.

The state agency Knisely was covering demanded that one of her key stories be fully retracted. While her coverage remains on West Virginia Public Broadcasting's website, Knisely is gone. She says she was told the decision came from the station's chief executive.

Interviews with 20 people with direct knowledge of events at West Virginia Public Broadcasting indicate Knisely's involuntary departure from her position as a part-time reporter was not an aberration but part of a years-long pattern of mounting pressure on the station from Gov. Jim Justice's administration and some state legislators.

"We all knew that our jobs could go at any moment if politicians fought that hard enough," says former West Virginia Public Broadcasting reporter and producer Roxy Todd. "Gov. Justice's presence was always looming over us."

Since 2017, politicians have sought to eliminate state funding. The governor appointed partisans hostile to public broadcasting to key oversight positions. And the station's chief executive has intervened repeatedly in journalistic decisions.

"The press ... needs to be free from interference"

Knisely's dismissal was first reported by Steven Allen Adams, the state government reporter for Ogden Newspapers, in late December. "This reporting focused on some of the most vulnerable people who are in state-run facilities," Knisely tweeted about her stories.

"I am deeply concerned about the state of WV media," Knisely later posted. "It is our job as reporters to watch & report on decision makers. In our state, one of the poorest, not everyone can drive to the Capitol where decisions are being made. Not everyone has internet access to stream meetings."

According to its 2021 annual report, West Virginia Public Broadcasting serves 684,000 television viewers each month and 91,000 radio listeners each week. Its website received 1.6 million page views from December 2021 to December 2022, according to station materials.

In a statement to NPR News, West Virginia Public Broadcasting Chief Executive Carl "Butch" Antolini denies firing Knisely and any hint of political interference in coverage: "A lot of the information that has been reported or disseminated is either partially or completely inaccurate." He said she was let go when a full-time reporter was hired. The statement was the only response Antolini or any West Virginia Public Broadcasting official would give NPR News for this story, despite repeated questioning.



A view of the West Virginia Statehouse before Gov. Jim Justice's second inauguration in 2021.

Jeremy Hogan/SOPA Images/LightRocket via Getty Images

"The press acts as a check and a balance on government," says former West Virginia Public Broadcasting news director Jesse Wright, who left in early 2020, before Antolini's arrival as the station's chief executive. "To be effective in that role, it needs to be free from interference from the people that it covers." Wright

says the two chief executives he served under would notify him when the station's stories inflamed politicians, but never intervened in his news decisions.

West Virginia Public Broadcasting plays outsized role in state's shrinking media industry

West Virginia news outlets have been holding powerful political and financial interests to account for more than a century. Vast natural resources and wealth sit alongside abject poverty in the state. The news industry has hit hard times, too, and West Virginia Public Broadcasting now plays an outsized role in the local media landscape.

A significant number of the people who spoke to NPR asked not to be named in this story, saying they fear it would damage them professionally.

"I have concerns about independent news gathering — there and across the state," says Andrea Billups, the station's news director from 2020 until January 2022. "It's disturbing to think it's eroding."

West Virginia Public Broadcasting was troubled before Antolini arrived in 2021, having been roiled by allegations of favoritism under the previous CEO. And the state's dominant newspaper is embroiled in its own journalistic controversy. Meanwhile, the state has become increasingly conservative; Republicans, many of whom are skeptical of public broadcasting, now hold a supermajority in the legislature. Many of the people who spoke to NPR say they worry that state lawmakers or the governor will use the current crisis as a reason to slash West Virginia Public Broadcasting's funding.

West Virginia Public Broadcasting is part of the national system of public broadcasting stations and pays fees to NPR to broadcast its flagship programs. More than a third of West Virginia Public Broadcasting revenue comes directly from the state. Outside West Virginia, there are currently eight NPR member stations licensed to state entities, according to NPR. Many others are licensed to state universities. Allegations of serious political pressure on state-funded stations are rare.

Like many of its peers, West Virginia Public Broadcasting says it subscribes to the guidelines in the NPR Ethics Handbook, the PBS Redbook, and the Code of Integrity for Public Media. The latter echoes the NPR and PBS codes: "Protect the editorial process from the fact and appearance of undue influence."

Governor tests West Virginia Public Broadcasting's independence



West Virginia Gov. Jim Justice delivers his annual State of the State address at the state Capitol in Charleston on Jan. 11, 2023.

Chris Jackson/AP

The arrival of Justice on the political scene has tested both elements of that pledge. Justice campaigned for governor as a Democrat in 2016, yet adopted a form of conservative populism championed by former President Donald Trump. He is one of West Virginia's wealthiest people, the owner of coal mines, resorts and other endeavors. (Justice's communications director, Jordan Damron, did not respond to repeated requests for comment.)

NPR News correspondent Howard Berkes reported aggressively on Justice's mines prior to his entry into electoral politics. During Justice's candidacy, NPR News revealed that his coal mines and other companies owed \$15 million in unpaid taxes and federal safety fines. Journalists from West Virginia Public Broadcasting sometimes collaborated with Berkes, who has since retired. Other major national outlets picked up the story.

Once in office in early 2017, Justice sought to jettison all state funding for West Virginia Public Broadcasting. That would have caused the station to shut down, state public broadcasting officials said at the time.



A coal separator sorts and piles up coal at the Tams mountaintop removal mine near Beckley, W.Va., in 2016. The mine is owned by the family of Gov. Jim Justice.

Anna Boiko-Weyrauch/NPR

After a significant public outcry, Justice relented. Yet state legislators still cut West Virginia Public Broadcasting's state funding by nearly a quarter, roughly \$1 million.

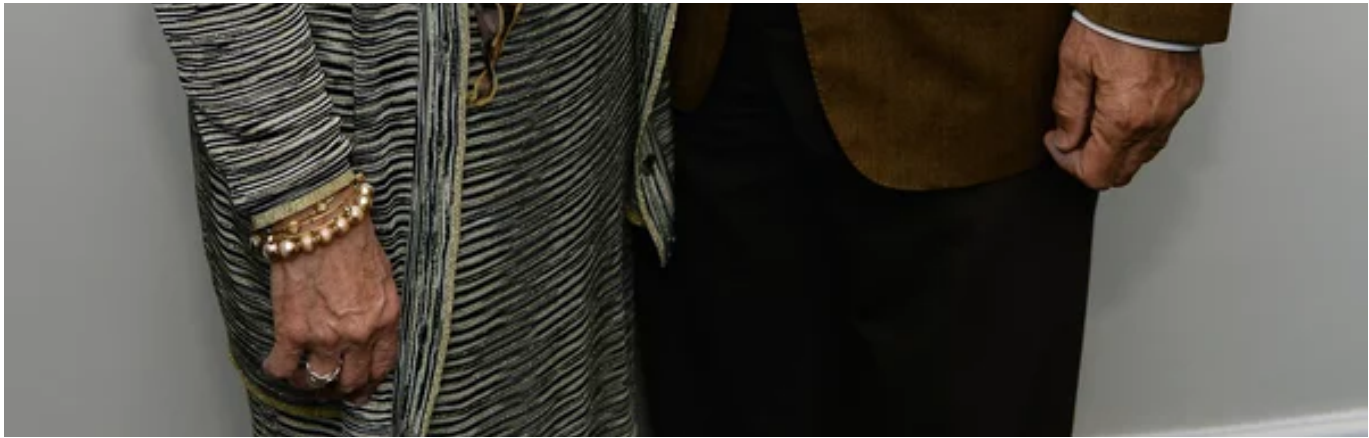
That represented about 10% of West Virginia Public Broadcasting's entire budget. Job cuts ensued. Two senior station officials, Eddie Isom and Marilyn DiVita, pressed the newsroom to stop covering Justice's business travails, according to Wright, then the news director. (Neither Isom nor DiVita responded to NPR's queries.)

"Eddie was pretty vocal about it. So was Marilyn," Wright recalls.

He says they asked why the station should antagonize a major source of its revenue. And Wright says they suggested he could leave it to other news outlets, such as the *Charleston Gazette-Mail* and the nonprofit site Mountain State Spotlight.

Wright says he remembers how he felt about it: "Hell, no. I'm not going to let Ken Ward [the co-founder of Mountain State Spotlight] own a story we were able to take a lead on, thanks to Howard."





In 2018, Gov. Justice fired then-Education Secretary Gayle Manchin (left). Justice is now considering a run against Gayle Manchin's husband, Democratic U.S. Sen. Joe Manchin (right).

Dimitrios Kambouris/Getty Images for The New Yorker

Later in the summer of 2017, Justice switched parties. The next year, he fired state Education and Arts Secretary Gayle Manchin, the wife of West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin, a Democrat whom Justice is considering running against in 2024.

West Virginia Public Broadcasting had been under the state department of education and the arts. Justice moved it to the Department of Arts, Culture and History. It is now overseen by the governor-appointed state arts curator and a board called the Educational Broadcasting Authority.

NPR and West Virginia Public Broadcasting kept reporting on the governor's continuing failure to meet his obligations. And Wright says pressure recurred, although he tried to shield his journalists from any political or corporate heat.

"I always saw my job as part of a firewall to take that and not let it trickle down into the newsroom," Wright says.

Accusations of favoritism open the door to political influence

The spring after the budget cuts, the station's CEO took a job at Vermont Public. His replacement, Chuck Roberts, had come up through the production side of the station and sought to champion it.

But his tenure proved rocky.

The following incidents, based on accounts of four people with knowledge, have never been previously reported. (They requested anonymity to discuss the highly sensitive episodes.)

In 2018, Roberts was accused of favoritism after he gave a promotion and significant raise to a female employee with whom he had a close personal relationship. The job opening had not been posted publicly, according to a grievance filed by a more experienced colleague. The complaint was ultimately settled.

In early 2020, a male staffer at the station filed a sexual harassment complaint with the West Virginia Public Employees Grievance Board against that same female employee, saying Roberts had dismissed the seriousness of his allegations because of Roberts' friendship with the employee. (She is no longer with West Virginia Public Broadcasting.) The staffer also alleged that he was passed over for a promotion in retaliation for his complaint.

The Educational Broadcasting Authority, led by its chairman, forced Roberts to take two weeks of unpaid leave and to apologize to his leadership team for what he termed an "inappropriate" relationship. (Roberts did not respond to NPR's detailed requests for comment.) NPR News has reviewed internal messages among staffers at the time, which reflected low morale and a belief that the station's leadership had failed them.

Roberts was weakened; others made their moves.

Attempts to cut funds and take over a prized program

In winter 2021, the Senate Finance Committee, led by state Sen. Eric Tarr, acted to slash all funding for public broadcasting. The state curator, Randall Reid-Smith, directed Roberts not to talk to state lawmakers, three people with knowledge say. Roberts nonetheless personally delivered a single-page fact sheet about the station to the state Capitol for lawmakers.





West Virginia Arts Curator Randall Reid-Smith, shown at a state cultural museum in 2009, demanded to review all newsletters put out by the station and sought to win control of the popular show Mountain Stage.

Bob Bird/AP

With some lawmakers' support, Reid-Smith, a former opera singer, was himself angling to wrest away control of the station's crown jewel, Mountain Stage. The program, distributed nationally by NPR, draws renowned musical acts to West Virginia for live performances. (Reid-Smith did not respond to requests for comment.)

Another outcry ensued. The legislature ended up preserving most of the funds for public broadcasting and the station retained Mountain Stage.

That year, Reid-Smith required that newsletters be reviewed by him and the governor's communications office before release, according to four people at West Virginia Public Broadcasting at the time. That included newsletters created by news programs.

Oliver Artherhults, then an associate producer for West Virginia Public Broadcasting's program Inside Appalachia, says journalists ended up self-censoring — offering as one example the removal of references to proposed legislation that would have enacted protections for people on the basis of sexual orientation.

In August 2021, Justice appointed five new members to the West Virginia Educational Broadcasting Authority.

Among the new directors was attorney Danielle Waltz, a top lobbyist for the West Virginia Chamber of Commerce. She had been a member of the board of directors of the Cardinal Institute for West Virginia Policy, a conservative think tank that has characterized state funding on West Virginia Public Broadcasting as

"wasteful" spending that should be returned to taxpayers. (Waltz did not return a message seeking comment.)



Coal magnate Don Blankenship is shown outside a federal courthouse in Charleston, W.Va., after his 2015 trial for violating mine safety standards. His former political adviser sits on the state board overseeing the station.

Chris Tilly/AP

Another new director was political consultant Greg Thomas, a lobbyist and former top adviser to coal baron Don Blankenship, who infamously spent a year in federal custody over safety failures at a mine where an explosion killed 29 miners. Thomas' Twitter feed contains frequent digs at media outlets, including NPR.

"No one believes anything the media/government says," Thomas tweeted last August. His most common refrain: "Climate change is a hoax."

The *Charleston Gazette-Mail* recently fired three journalists after they publicly objected to a deferential interview of Blankenship by the paper's owner. Thomas called them "activists" for taking to Twitter. (The paper's owner is also the top Democrat in the House of Delegates.)

Thomas tells NPR he "might run my mouth more than I should" on Twitter but that he works constructively on the board to improve West Virginia Public Broadcasting.

A third director appointed by Justice was Stephen Taylor Hood. Hood is listed as a business partner of Sen. Tarr, on at least seven limited liability companies, according to a review of state records. They cite real estate, marketing, polling, veterinary services and other ventures. In four instances, the two men are the only business officers listed. (Hood could not be reached for comment; Tarr did not respond to an emailed request for comment.)

A new chief executive with close ties to the administration

In early October 2021, the Educational Broadcasting Authority fired Roberts without publicly stating a cause. Two weeks later, the board named Antolini to serve as West Virginia Public Broadcasting's acting executive director.

Carl 'Butch' Antolini named WVPB Executive Director@wvpublic <https://t.co/Fgh30tWcscpic.twitter.com/R8CzlgjuT2>

— WV Press Association (@WVPress) May 18, 2022

Antolini had spent years at small West Virginia newspapers and a local radio station. He had also earlier served as Justice's communications director.

Antolini began meeting with his new colleagues one-on-one at the station, including the newsroom. According to two colleagues who requested anonymity, at a meeting in October 2021, Antolini declared himself disappointed that a former West Virginia Public Broadcasting reporter who had pursued stories about Justice had already left the station. Antolini said he had wanted to fire the reporter himself.

Typically, the corporate chiefs of news outlets do not become involved in journalistic decisions; they allow their top news executives to run the newsroom. Todd, the former reporter and producer for Inside Appalachia, says she asked Antolini how the broadcaster's journalistic independence would be protected.

Antolini made clear he'd be responsible for major journalistic decisions, she says, and that he would be the one to protect the broadcaster from political heat.

"Yeah I feel honestly like I'm going to have to quit," Todd wrote to a former colleague in a Dec. 3, 2021, text. "This isn't ethically sound." (Todd, who now works at a public radio station in neighboring Virginia, shared the text with NPR for this story.)

In May 2022, Antolini received the job permanently and was given the CEO title. "We have been impressed with his efforts and his passion and vision for West Virginia Public Broadcasting," William File, the Educational Broadcasting Authority's chairman, said. File added, "He has developed a good working relationship with our legislature, the governor's office and with our supporters throughout the state."

A hard-hitting story angers the state health secretary

Last summer, while unemployed, Amelia Ferrell Knisely took a gig writing on children's health issues for a child advocacy group that does not lobby the state. In September, Knisely joined West Virginia Public Broadcasting in a part-time position and continued her past focus on poverty and child welfare. As the fall progressed, she turned her attention to the state agency overseeing facilities that care for people with disabilities.

The backlash that would follow prompted Antolini to do damage control, according to several people with direct knowledge and a review of email exchanges. The chief executive dictated what interviews should be done, how they should be conducted — and who would be covering state politics.

On Nov. 3, West Virginia Public Broadcasting published a story by Knisely reflecting tough questions from state Senate leaders. Its headline: "Reports Show People With Disabilities Are Abused in State Care."

In an 8 1/2-page letter to Antolini, the state health secretary demanded a full retraction. He denied some key assertions, dismissed others, and said the Senate based its analysis on incorrect information.

The matter continued to gather steam.

Eleven days later, federal regulators announced an investigation of the state health department's treatment of people with disabilities. Antolini was livid, colleagues say.

In late November, Antolini ordered West Virginia Public Broadcasting news director Eric Douglas to conduct an interview with the state health secretary, Bill Crouch, according to two people with knowledge. Antolini demanded to review Douglas' questions ahead of time and sat in on the interview, conducted at the station's Charleston studios.

A spokeswoman for Crouch later told Ogden Newspapers that "Secretary Crouch had a friendship with Butch Antolini for decades." (Crouch, who did not return a message left with his wife seeking comment, has since stepped down.)

In early December, Douglas told Knisely that state health officials had called Antolini with an unspecified threat to hurt the broadcaster. As a result, the news director said, she would have to stop reporting on the health agency.

On Dec. 14, West Virginia Public Broadcasting put in a routine request for press passes at the state legislature for its journalists, including Knisely.

Asked the next day about Knisely's work outside West Virginia Public Broadcasting, Douglas said she would be there strictly to report for the station. "I do expect she will serve a vital role in our legislative coverage," he wrote to legislative aides.





Reporting by Knisely, shown in May 2021, sparked a backlash from state health officials. The station's chief executive ordered that she be taken off the story and then that she be dismissed.

F. Brian Ferguson/Report for America

At approximately the same time — early afternoon on Dec. 15 — Knisely delivered a letter to West Virginia Public Broadcasting's human resources department, according to two people with knowledge. Knisely documented Antolini's involvement, the pressure from state officials on the station, and being barred from reporting on the state health agency.

A few hours later, Isom, the broadcaster's chief operating officer and programming director, overrode Douglas, telling the legislature that West Virginia Public Broadcasting did not need credentials for Knisely, emails reviewed by NPR show.

The communications director for state Senate President Craig Blair forwarded Isom's note to Douglas, who replied that Antolini had told him that "things had changed with Amelia." He echoed the language of the communications director, writing, "you're right, it does seem gross and shady."

On Dec. 20, West Virginia Public Broadcasting let Knisely go.

Sen. Blair, a frequent antagonist of the governor, defended Knisely's reporting in a statement he released on Dec. 29. It was republished in several newspapers around the state.

"It appears our Executive Branch has gone from largely refusing to cooperate with the media to actively undermining it," Blair wrote. "I hope the Executive Branch disavows this blatant abuse of the First Amendment and holds the management of West Virginia Public Broadcasting responsible for it."

Later that day, File, the broadcasting authority chairman, emailed a statement to reporters supporting Antolini and West Virginia Public Broadcasting. Metadata show that the document was created by and last edited by Antolini or someone with direct access to his account. (File did not respond to a message left with his brother seeking comment.)

That same day, Blair granted an interview to the commercial radio news station West Virginia MetroNews in which he criticized West Virginia Public Broadcasting for cutting Knisely loose.

Antolini ordered his news director to get the Senate president on West Virginia Public Broadcasting's airwaves immediately, saying Blair misspoke or was uninformed. The CEO warned that the station could lose all state funding. Antolini instructed Douglas to listen to the MetroNews interview "three or four times" and said, once more, he would review Douglas' questions prior to the interview.



West Virginia Senate President Craig Blair, shown at the state Capitol in Charleston in 2019, has accused the Justice administration of violating the station's journalistic independence.

Craig Hudson/Charleston Gazette-Mail via AP

On Jan. 3, emails show, Douglas asked Blair's communications director for the chance to interview the Senate president. She turned him down, writing, "I don't believe there's anything to be gained from an interview like this."

Later that afternoon, Suzanne Higgins, a longtime executive producer, told colleagues she was resigning just before the legislative session, citing what she called Antolini's interference. She also said Isom had warned her that West

Virginia Public Broadcasting reporters cannot be producing stories that anger the Justice administration.

West Virginia Public Broadcasting's future unclear

Greg Thomas, who sits on the Educational Broadcasting Authority, says he was troubled by Knisely's departure but that the board had no involvement. Overall, he says, West Virginia Public Broadcasting has resolved management issues and should now reconsider more fundamental questions about its mission.

"What do we need?" he says. "Does NPR have a role in it? Does public broadcasting have a role in it? I don't know."

On Jan. 25, two days after NPR first approached Antolini about this story, West Virginia Public Broadcasting abruptly changed its website. It no longer links to any reporting from NPR News. Most member station sites do.

In his statement to NPR and other news outlets, Antolini said that the station had not retracted Knisely's stories. He wrote that it was extremely important to note that she was welcome to apply for another full-time position at West Virginia Public Broadcasting that had become available.

Knisely can be found once more in Charleston covering the legislature and the welfare of people with disabilities in state facilities — this time, for *The Register-Herald* of Beckley. The state Senate took up the issue on its first day of its session this year.

According to two people with direct knowledge of its activities, the legislature's commission on special investigations — a joint committee of the House and Senate — has launched hearings behind closed doors about the political pressures besetting the station.

Jeff Dean contributed to this report.

Note: This story was reported by NPR Media Correspondent David Folkenflik and edited by Acting Chief Business Editor Emily Kopp and Managing Editor Gerry Holmes. Under NPR's protocol for reporting on issues involving the network, no senior news executive or corporate official saw this story before it was posted publicly.

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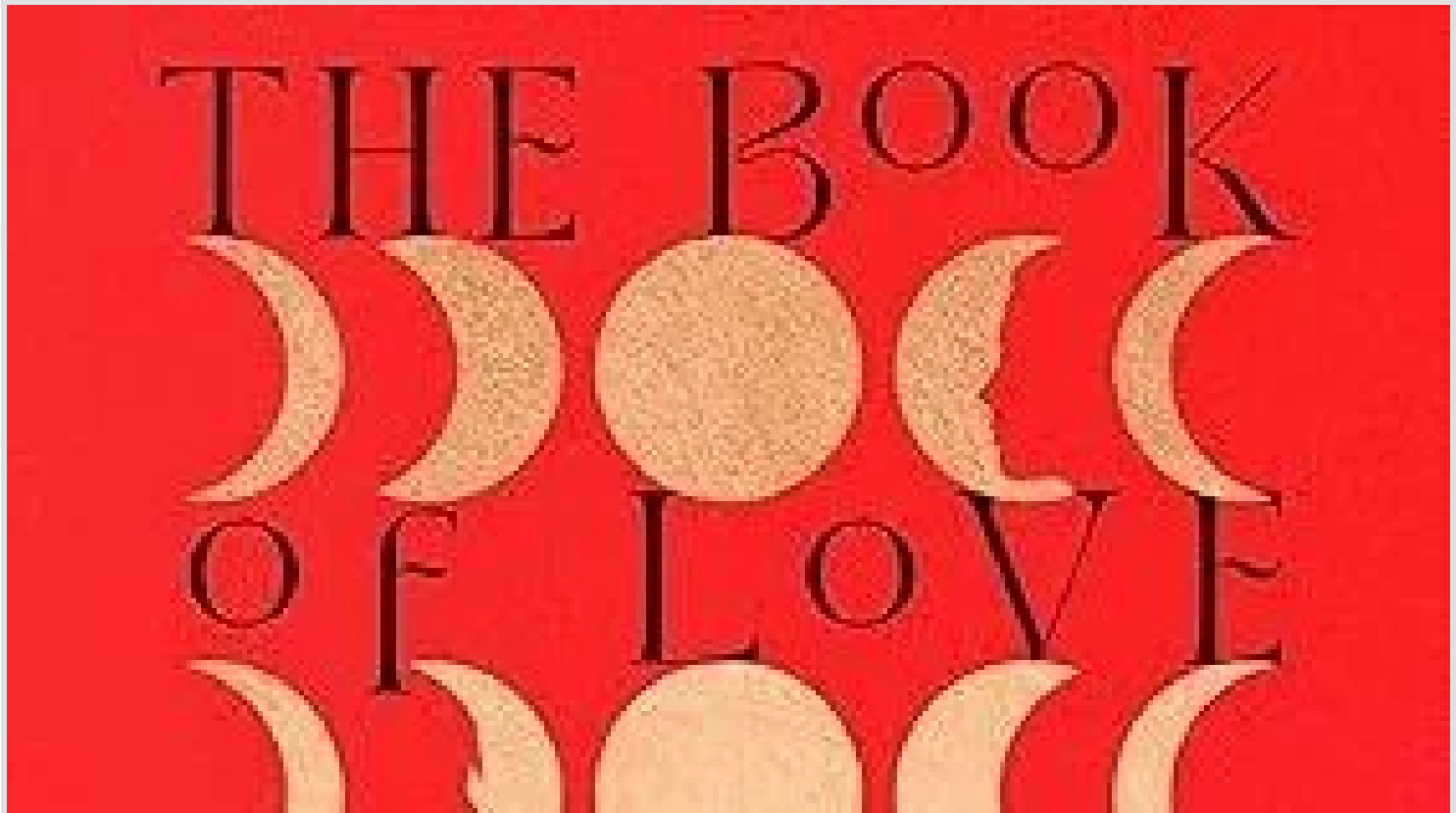


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