

Mergers, FCC pressure threaten integrity of American journalism

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Pending media mergers and the Trump administration’s pressure on Federal Communications Commission-licensed broadcasters threaten the integrity of American journalism in a way our nation has never before experienced. Many Americans still get news about current events from television and radio, despite the popularity of user-generated and social media platforms.

Licensed TV and radio stations — over 19,000 across the country — are required by the Communications Act of 1934 to serve the “public interest, convenience, or necessity,” as a condition of their licenses, which are renewed every eight years. Not only must stations keep extensive program logs, but they must also retain files for public inspection, track requests for broadcast time made by political candidates and comply with children’s programming regulations.

Yet since taking office in January 2025, President Donald Trump and FCC Chair Brendan Carr have [repeatedly threatened](#) TV station ownership groups with license revocation for political provocations, such as Jimmy Kimmel's monologues on his late-night show. Assailing networks such as CNN for their Iran war coverage, Carr recently posted on X that "broadcasters that are running hoaxes and news distortions — also known as the fake news — have a chance now to correct course before their license renewals come up. The law is clear. Broadcasters must operate in the public interest, and they will lose their licenses if they do not."

The threats from the president and FCC are remarkable when considered in historical context. In the 92 years of operation under the Communications Act, only a handful of stations have ever been challenged for biased content and lost their licenses. In a 1972 case, Pennsylvania broadcaster WXUR featured a fundamentalist preacher whose tirades on "Interfaith Forum" were deemed to violate the FCC's "personal attack principle," leading to loss of its license. In a 1988 case, the owner of KHJ-TV in Los Angeles lost its license due to bribery and malfeasance on the part of its corporate parent.

Adding fuel to the fire, President Donald Trump personally sued ABC and CBS News for "news distortion" and libel, resulting in multimillion-dollar settlements prompted by the desire of parent corporations Disney and Paramount to maintain good relations with the administration, especially as proposed mergers and other corporate transactions are potentially subject to antitrust and other administrative review. Trump's DOJ threatened an antitrust review against Netflix, his disfavored suitor for the Warner acquisition.

Simply put, this administration's policies will break the standard model for broadcast renewal for those media outlets they deem to be hostile to their political goals. Holding broadcast licensees hostage to the political dictates of the White House is completely antithetical to the tradition of news operations grounded in the First Amendment and echoes the campaigns of repressive regimes in totalitarian states.

Now we face the prospect of Paramount combining its media properties, including "The Daily Show" and CBS News, with the vast media holdings of Warner Bros, which owns CNN and HBO. In the current charged political environment, it is not unreasonable to speculate that the administration will exert pressure on the new combined entity, controlled by the Ellison family, to stifle programming not in line with views endorsed by the White House. Stephen Colbert has already scheduled his departure from his late-night CBS show this May, but what lies in store for "This Week with John Oliver," "Anderson Cooper 360," "Face the Nation," "Fareed Zakaria GPS" and the other significant voices that bring uncensored reporting and commentary to American viewers?

We have withstood shifting political winds over the past century by preserving the balance of broadcast ownership rooted in a neutral “public interest” standard upheld both by Democratic and Republican administrations. Combining merger politics, the prospect of lost broadcasting licenses and lawsuits against news programs has created a poisonous brew which will further erode the integrity of American journalism at a time when we need the reasoned voices of thoughtful reporters more than ever. With our new media overlords determining the news American receive, we are headed for perilous seas.

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