Opinion

NCR Voices



Left: Tucker Carlson speaks with attendees at the AmericaFest in Phoenix on Dec. 18, 2021 (Wikimedia Commons/Gage Skidmore). Right: Don Lemon moderates a CNN Presidential Town Hall on July 21, 2021, at Mount St. Joseph University in Cincinnati. (Wikimedia Commons/Official White House Photo/Adam Schultz)



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Wow! First Tucker Carlson and then Don Lemon, both ousted on the same day. I want to jump on a plane, fly to Geneva and dash to the Basilica of the Visitation in Annecy to say a prayer of thanksgiving at the tomb of St. Francis de Sales, patron saint of journalists. The great saint is watching over the craft after all.

Of the two, Carlson is by far the worst, not even close. He may be the worst person to pose as a journalist in our time. Earlier this spring, documents obtained during discovery in the Dominion Voting Systems lawsuit against Fox News, which ended in a settlement last week, showed that Carlson knew his on-air claims that there were serious questions about the integrity of the 2020 election and that the Jan. 6, 2021, assault on the Capitol in Washington was really a peaceful protest were both bunk.

In speaking of President Donald Trump and his business acumen, Carlson was privately texting, "He's good at destroying things. He's the undisputed world champion of that. He could easily destroy us [Fox News] if we play it wrong. It's so obvious."

In another text, Carlson said he hated Trump "passionately." None of which prevented Carlson from doing a cringeworthy interview with Trump in which ridiculous statement after ridiculous statement went unchallenged. Stephen Colbert's takedown of the interview was priceless.

The Lincoln Project, a group of Republicans who want to reclaim their party from Trump and his sycophants, compiled a montage of Carlson's most outrageous claims. It takes a lot to offend me, and I found many of them offensive. Some were plainly racist and others were just bizarre. All were spoken with the kind of self-satisfied certainty that is the Carlson trademark.

Yet, according to The Washington Post, none of that got Carlson sacked on April 24. Instead, it was his negative comments about Fox management that were disclosed in the Dominion documents, as well as concerns about another lawsuit alleging Carlson created a hostile work environment.

Tell lies about the election, lies that you know to be untrue? That gets a pass. Insult an entire race of people? No problem. Hurl a curse at management in a text? There is the door.

Fox News did its best to create the current indifference to facticity that exists in large parts of the American right. They gave airtime to election deniers like Rudy Giuliani and Sidney Powell when they knew they were spreading lies and distrust.

And it wasn't just Carlson. Sean Hannity and Laura Ingraham made on-air claims that were demonstrably false and that they knew to be false. So the idea that a commitment to veracity has anything to do with keeping your job at the network can be set aside.

At CNN, they finally fired Lemon. He should have been fired a long time ago. Remember when he interviewed a woman who alleged she had been raped by Bill Cosby and Lemon wanted to know why she did not resist the attack by biting Cosby's penis? The next day, Lemon issued a half-hearted apology, and qualified that with the words, "As I am a victim myself, I would never want to suggest that any victim could have prevented a rape."

Now, we all can misspeak at times, and I do not think people should be fired because they misspoke. Perhaps the fact that Lemon is allegedly himself a victim of sexual assault means he should be wary of that experience clouding his own judgment. Reporters need a bit of distance from the issues they cover.

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There were other gaffes, such as his suggestion that former South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley "isn't in her prime." And he had the habit, common at CNN, of interviewing the victims of some tragedy in the immediate aftermath of that tragedy, and asking them how they feel, inviting them to relive a horror. It is worse than ambulance-chasing; it is voyeuristic and exploitative of people's pain.

Lemon often confuses an experience for an argument, and that confusion apparently played a part in his eventual firing. His interview last week with Vivek Ramaswamy, a conservative Republican presidential candidate, was an exercise in lousy journalism as Lemon got into a heated exchange, making himself part of the story.

At one point, Lemon said, "It's insulting that you're ... That you're sitting here whatever ethnicity you are 'splaining to me what it's like to be Black in America," to Ramaswamy, who is Indian American.

The phrase "whatever ethnicity you are" is bigoted, to be sure, and Lemon immediately apologized. But the rest of the sentence is problematic.

Ramaswamy's argument that, in the 19th century, the Second Amendment was critical to the securing of other political rights by Black Americans is ridiculous. But instead of probing Ramaswamy's argument and tying him in knots, which wouldn't have been that difficult, Lemon invoked his own experience as a Black man in the 21st century. He played the race card.

Reporters, like historians, need to let their subjects speak for themselves. They can, and should, probe and analyze, but they should never get into a shouting match like Lemon did. CNN routinely has guests — newsmakers and partisans and other controversialists like columnists — who can debate in a way a news host should not. Lemon crossed that line throughout his career.

As Catholics, we believe that truth is mediated through a variety of means: revelation, the natural law, the magisterium, the sense of the faithful. Truth is a value, a transcendent value, full stop. It is also the oxygen that allows journalism to breathe, too.

In wildly different ways, both Carlson and Lemon failed to hold themselves accountable to the demands truth places on journalism. Their departure is a boon to the craft.