

Chris Wallace and the Failure of CNN+



Last December, longtime Fox News anchor Chris Wallace shocked the news industry when he announced that he was leaving the network after almost two decades, and joining CNN's upcoming streaming service, *CNN+*. Wallace didn't get into the reason behind his departure at the time, but I think most media observers had a pretty good idea of what motivated it.

Just a few weeks earlier, reports emerged that Wallace had joined *Special Report* anchor Bret Baier and other veteran figures at the network in voicing objections to Fox corporate about the promotion and digital airing of Tucker Carlson's now infamous "Patriot Purge" special. The multi-part series, which sought to rewrite the events of January 6, was overflowing with wildly irresponsible claims, outlandish conspiracy theories, and outright falsehoods. Some may recall that it was the last straw for longtime contributors Stephen Hayes and Jonah Goldberg, who resigned from the network over it.

Despite the internal strife, network executives maintained

their backing of Carlson's project, though notably – as *NPR's* David Folkenflik described – Fox's *news* division distanced itself from *Patriot Purge* in the days leading up to its release. Both Wallace and Baier ran segments on their respective shows debunking several of the special's charges without specifically mentioning the series or Carlson by name.

Reactions to Wallace's departure weren't all that surprising.

Many loyal Fox News viewers celebrated the announcement, having grown disdainful of Wallace over the years for maintaining his journalistic integrity as a news anchor, rather than reduce himself to a Trump toady in the interest of ratings – a path many others at the network had taken.

Fox's critics and competitors pointed to the departure of Wallace, a widely respected newsman who many saw as a saving grace at the network, as further evidence of Fox's dwindling credibility as a news organization.

Some at Fox, like Guy Benson and Howard Kurtz, seemed to share that concern (at least to a degree), framing Wallace's move as a big loss for their network. Others in the right-wing media, like *NewsBusters'* Tim Graham, took exception to such sentiment.

"Howard Kurtz wishes Chris Wallace well at CNN, calls it a 'major loss' for Fox News." Graham tweeted at the time. "Is it? Let's see what happens to the 'Fox News Sunday' ratings."

I explained to Graham at the time that it was a major loss for people like me who want Fox to be a serious news organization. For those who are only concerned with ratings, it likely wouldn't be.

And sure enough, it hasn't been. *Fox News Sunday* has done just fine, viewership wise, in Wallace's absence.

As Bernie Goldberg (the owner of this website) often points

out, today's cable news industry reflects a business model, not a journalistic one. Thus ratings and key demos – not journalism – have become the sole measure of a cable-news network's worth... even to someone like Graham whose watchdog organization purports to stand for integrity in the news media.

Last month, while promoting his new CNN+ show, Wallace finally broke his silence on why he left Fox. His reasoning was pretty much what people expected.

"I just no longer felt comfortable with the programming at [the network]," he told the *New York Times*. "I'm fine with opinion: conservative opinion, liberal opinion, but when people start to question the truth – Who won the 2020 election? Was January 6 an insurrection? I found that unsustainable. I spent a lot of 2021 looking to see if there was a different place for me to do my job."

Wallace further explained that he wanted to get out of politics, and added, "One of the reasons that I left Fox was because I wanted to put all of that behind me. There has not been a moment when I have second-guessed myself about that decision."

All things considered, it was a pretty diplomatic critique of his former employer.

As for his new one, CNN, well... we all know what happened. CNN+ collapsed in a fiery inferno earlier this week. Millions of dollars invested in the off-shoot pay-service, and its promotion, did virtually nothing to motivate people to sign up for it. The losses were so bad that *Warner Bros. Discovery* pulled the plug on the venture in less than a month's time.

When I first heard about CNN+ last year, I was pretty skeptical that it would find an audience. Yet, I never expected it to fold as quickly as it did. As one would imagine, CNN's critics have had a field-day with the network's

digital demise. Some of the jokes have written themselves, and others have been quite clever.

Still, I'm not sure I've found any of them as amusing as the notion I keep reading online that Wallace has to be regretting his decision to leave Fox.

Why would he be regretful?

Wallace is assuredly disappointed by the collapse of CNN+. He had his own program there, was allowed to take it in a direction he wanted, and from the clips I saw on YouTube and Mediaite, it seemed to be a pretty quality show. He featured some intriguing guests, talked about interesting topics, and asked lots of smart, provocative questions.

But again, Wallace didn't leave Fox for greener pastures (at least not in the traditional sense). Fox paid him well, gave him plenty of exposure, let him do his show largely as he wanted, and was very much interested in re-signing him. He didn't jump to CNN as part of some power-play, nor was it out of some over-inflated, David Caruso-esque sense of self-worth.

Wallace left on principle. He sought liberation. He wanted out.

Standing on principle, especially when one's career is involved, isn't always easy. If you don't believe me, ask Bernie Goldberg. Doing what your conscience tells you comes with professional and financial risks – potentially significant ones.

Fortunately for Wallace, he's made a lot of money in the business, is set for life financially, and has maintained a strong reputation as a credible journalist. Those things weren't really on the line. He could have retired from the profession after calling it quits at Fox, but at the age of 74, chose instead to try something different. He performed well in the new role (in the little time that he had), but the

platform was pretty much doomed from the beginning.

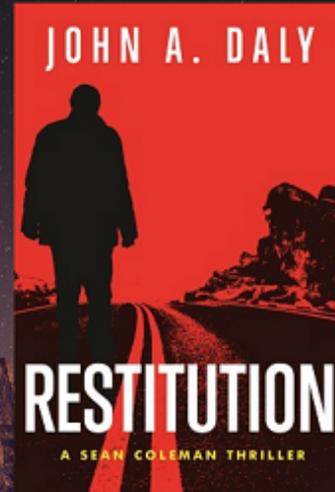
A big problem with CNN+ is that it relied on a damaged CNN brand that already struggles to pull in viewers on basic cable. Adding an additional pay-service on top of that brand, in a saturated, entertainment-oriented market, was a serious gamble. And while I find it commendable that CNN+ built its marquee programming around a more traditional, journalistic model, the sad reality is that while a lot of people say they prefer that type of content over the *news-entertainment* alternative, they don't actually mean it. If they did, more news organizations would deliver it.

Like I said, Wallace will come out of this okay, and probably end up on the main network (where I think he can only help the product), but I do feel bad for the hard-working lower-level employees, many of whom will lose their jobs. I get why CNN's critics and competitors are so giddy over what happened, but there's a human toll whenever a serious business venture folds, and I hope those folks land on their feet.

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— Jim Geraghty
senior political correspondent of National Review and author of the "Dangerous Clique" thriller series



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National Review's Jim Geraghty on "Restitution".