

CNN's *The Lead with Jake Tapper*

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JAKE TAPPER: Breaking news in our Pop Culture Lead. Disney and the ABC network are taking Jimmy Kimmel live off the air indefinitely. This follows a controversy over comments the late night comedian made Monday night about Charlie Kirk's suspected killer and the MAGA movement. And their reaction to the assassination. Let's get straight to CNN's chief media affairs correspondent, Brian Stelter. Brian, what is going on?

BRIAN STELTER: That's right. This is fast developing this afternoon, Jake, amid pressure from the Trump-aligned FCC and in the past few minutes, ABC confirmed to CNN that Kimmel's show will be off the air "indefinitely." We have not yet heard from Kimmel or his representatives. That's how quickly this has been developing. But let's back up and look at what Kimmel actually said on the program that has caused controversy. This is from Monday night in his Monday evening monologue, Kimmel suggested that the alleged killer of Charlie Kirk might have been a pro-Trump Republican. He said, "the MAGA gang desperately trying to characterize this kid who murdered Charlie Kirk as anything other than one of them and doing everything they can to score political points from it." He said "in between the finger pointing, there was grieving." Kimmel was expressing what we've heard some other liberals say in recent days that the motives are unclear and that maybe the suspect in this case was a Republican or was some sort of far-right fringe figure. Of course, there has been a lot of discussion about that in recent days. There's a lot of evidence pointing in other directions about the suspect, but Kimmel was on the air talking about this, making a very serious commentary amid his jokes in his monologue Monday night. Here's where it became interesting earlier today. The FCC chairman, Brendan Carr, went on a far right webcast and condemned Kimmel and urged ABC to suspend him. He also talked about possible regulatory punishments of Disney because there are lots of different stations that have licenses with the FCC within the past hour. We've heard from a big owner of stations that have affiliations with ABC. A company called Nexstar saying that they were going to suspend Kimmel's show on their stations. So, in other words, about two dozen stations were refusing to air Kimmel's show tonight as a result of this controversy. And then following word that some of those stations were basically revolting against Kimmel. Disney, the parent company of ABC, decided to yank the show entirely. So, that's all we know at the moment. We know Kimmel will not be on the air tonight or for the foreseeable future, because the network says the show has been yanked off the air indefinitely.

TAPPER: Brian, just to take one issue — your interpretation of what Kimmel said, I think is the one that Brendan Carr had and the one that the individuals at Nexstar have, but what he said specifically was: "We hit some new lows over the weekend with the MAGA gang desperately trying to characterize this kid who murdered Charlie Kirk as anything other than one of them and doing everything they can to score political points from it" That can be read in several ways. That could be heard in several ways.

STELTER: Yes.

TAPPER: It could also be interpreted — it could also be argued, he's saying that what the MAGA gang is doing is just trying to make sure that they don't have any ownership of it, not necessarily that — that this killer, this horrible person, was part of them.

STELTER: I just think you're making a very important point. You're making a very important point. And let's take a little bit step further. This was all on Monday night. Nobody seemed to notice this yesterday, Jake. This all erupted in the past few hours when the Trump-aligned FCC chairman decided to point at it. Now, I've heard from him in the past few minutes — Brendan Carr — thanking Nexstar for doing the right thing by yanking the show. He has not yet commented on ABC, yanking the show altogether across the entire country. But let's remember that when Stephen Colbert show was canceled over the summer, what did President Trump say? He said, next up will be an even less talented Jimmy Kimmel. It is clear that pro-Trump allies have been trying to target ABC over Kimmel for several weeks now, and tonight they've prevailed.

TAPPER: Yeah. Brian Stelter, thanks so much for that breaking news. Let's go right to the panel. And let me first start by showing I wondered what was going on earlier today when I saw this pop up on Twitter. This is the FCC chairman, Brendan Carr on a far-right podcast talking about what Kimmel's comments were. Let's roll that tape.

FCC COMMISSIONER BRENDAN CARR: You know, when you look at the conduct that has taken place by Jimmy Kimmel, it appears to be some of the sickest conduct possible. [SCREEN WIPE] Obviously, there's calls for him to be fired. I think, you know. You could certainly see a path forward for suspension over this and again, you know, the FCC is going to have remedies that we could look at.

TAPPER: Joe are you — are you comfortable with the FCC playing this role?

JOSEPH MORENO: I don't. I don't think this is a legal issue. I don't think this can be pointed to the FCC or the Trump administration and say, well, this is about them going after Kimmel because of what he said. Personally, I think it's more of a cultural issue. And I got to tell you. I'm about as moderate a Republican as you can get. I'm from New York. I have not been comfortable watching late-night television for 15 years because when you have conservative leanings and you're constantly mocked and you're constantly feel like you're doing something wrong, you shut it off. You don't watch it anymore. And then what happens is it's circular. If the host doesn't have that audience, the host doesn't worry about keeping an audience like that. It goes in circles. And, at some point, you get things like this where you say things. And that wasn't the full quote. The further quote was that he mocked President Trump for flying the flags at half staff in remembrance of Charlie Kirk and said it's like grieving for of a four year old as a four year old grieves for a goldfish.

TAPPER: No, no.

MORENO: That was the full quote.

TAPPER: Well, the full quote was, I think he ran the clip of — of a reporter asking President Trump how he was doing with the death of Charlie Kirk. And President Trump said, I think I'm doing okay. And then he proceeded to talk about the ballroom that was being built on the White House grounds. I think that was that was the full context. Again, I didn't say any of this. I'm just trying to present as accurate a picture of what did happen. Eliot, this is the FCC commissioner. We — I don't think we have seen an FCC commissioner this aggressive in our lifetimes. What do you think of it all?

ELIE HONIG: So, to the point of whether there's a legal element here, I think Joe's right. Like, the First Amendment says Congress shall make no law, which means. You can only enforce the First Amendment against the government. So can Jimmy Kimmel. Sue? No, he can't. He can't sue ABC for making a decision to remove him. That's a private entity. But what Donald Trump is doing repeatedly is he's expanding his executive power in two ways. One, I would say, is unprecedented. That's the traditional stuff. I have more authority to hire and fire executive branch officials. I don't have to respond to congress, that kind of thing. He's fighting that out in the court. We've seen that before. What's unprecedented, however, is the way Donald Trump is using official power from the FCC on to go after universities, law firms, and media companies that he disagrees with on policy or on politics. That is new. We've not seen that from any president before.

TAPPER: This is actually cancel culture. I mean, that's what this is. The chairman of the fed — Federal Communications Commission, Brendan Carr, added on Ben Johnson's podcast that the broadcasters, including ABC, have a license granted by us at the FCC, and that comes with it an obligation to operate in the public interest. Elsewhere in the interview, Carr attacked Kimmel as talentless and suggested the late-night comedians comments displayed some sort of quote, desperate irrelevance. Is that — is that what we want the FCC chairman to be doing?

CHUCK ROCHA: It's a very slippery slope. And there's a pattern. We keep talking about it like it's not happening and it just keeps happening over and over and over again with folks he disagrees with. I'm a Democrat. I'll say, what happened to Charlie Kirk is disgusting. We should have a court. If he did it, he should be prosecuted to every extent of the law. We shouldn't have to say that. That's just common sense. But we also should say the First Amendment matters to everybody, whether they agree or they disagree. And I just think that what we're going through right now is unprecedented. It's unseemly. And I think that that it's really getting out of hand because it's just happening more and more and more with folks who disagree.

TAPPER: We should let — we do have the clip that Jimmy Kimmel said Monday night. Let's obviously this is not the entire 8 or 9 minute monologue. This is just one clip of it. But this is what he said.

JIMMY KIMMEL [on ABC's *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*, 09/15/25]: We hit some new lows over the weekend with the MAGA gang desperately trying to characterize this kid who murdered Charlie Kirk as anything other than one of them and doing everything they can to score political points from it.

TAPPER: Now, the way that Fox covered what he just said, there was, Kimmel suggests Kirk assassin was one of the MAGA gang despite reports of leftist leanings. I don't know that I think that that is an accurate description, but they have the First Amendment to write what they want to write.

HONIG: Yeah. The job of the FCC is not to regulate and police content. It's not do we like this? Does this make us comfortable or uncomfortable? I don't like anything about what Jimmy Kimmel said. Frankly, I agree with Joe. I find his comments reprehensible, but it's not the FCC's job to say, do we like this or do we not? And FCC, of course, is a government actor. And I'm — I'm thinking sort of off the top of my head here. But if ABC wanted to fight this, clearly they don't, because they've made the decision to dispatch or suspend Jimmy Kimmel — if they wanted to fight this, they might have a basis to go into court the same way that law firms have gone into court. And Harvard, among other universities, have gone into court and said this is an overextension of government power, of executive power. This violates the First Amendment. And again, they can bring that because the FCC is a government actor. But Jimmy Kimmel cannot do anything against ABC.

TAPPER: So one other thing that the Fed — that the FCC commissioner, Brendan Carr, did in that interview with Benny Johnson, who, by the way, has said plenty of things that a lot of people find objectionable, is he suggested, actually, the exact course of action that happened. He said what could happen is local affiliates could complain to ABC about the content, and then those local affiliates could say they're going to refuse to air Jimmy Kimmel live. And that's actually what happened. Nexstar, which owns a bunch of ABC affiliates, they were the first ones to say in a statement, and Variety broke this news. We're not going to — we're going to preempt this show. Is there any coming back from this, do you think?

MORENO: Well, I don't think ABC is canceling him because they're afraid of the FCC. I think they're afraid that they're going to lose whatever audience he has left, because that's such an offensive thing. He said. As far as look, there's so much media alternatives at this point. So I think the FCC's — the range of authority they have is less and less because there are so many other outlets to — to reach out to. So if Kimmel wants to reappear somewhere else, he will. I think the point is, though, that again, when you alienate a part of the population who at some point just stops watching, then you have no incentive to keep whatever left of that audience as there is. And then, you know, it just kind of goes down the drain.

TAPPER: Let me ask you a question. Do you think that we are holding late-night comedians to a standard for speech and decency, that we do not hold our elected leaders, including the President of the United States, to.

MORENO: I guess, who's we? I mean, you're talking about audience watchers or American citizens?

TAPPER: The American — the American people, the — the government of the of the United States, as of now. Are we demanding that our late night comedians behave in a more upright and more conciliatory, insensitive way than we demand that our President act?

MORENO: Well, I think it's not so much demanding. It's — if you don't like what Kimmel saying, you turn it off. If you don't like what trump is doing, you don't vote for him. So I think that's the power you have. And so I don't know that there's any kind of.

TAPPER: But we're not turning off Jimmy Kimmel. There's being pressure applied to have him canceled.

MORENO: That's ABC's choice though. They don't have to cancel him.

ROCHA: But they feel the heat. That's why they do it. Everybody who gets in the line of fire of this administration feels the heat. And they're like, whoa, whoa whoa whoa. We don't want any heat here. This is the big boys. And they all back down.

HONIG: Yeah, I'm actually surprised. Look, we've seen law firms back down. Most — Many law firms settled. I was surprised. I was disappointed by that. We've seen many colleges, including Columbia, settle, right? And it's, I think, noteworthy and alarming to note how many free actors in private — in the private sector have decided to give in to settle rather than to stand up and fight. There are some counterexamples. There are law firms that have fought. Harvard and other universities have fought but, that's a decision every private entity has to make for itself, based on the bottom line.