

CNN's *The Whole Story with Anderson Cooper*

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13 minutes and 48 seconds

ANDERSON COOPER: Jimmy Kimmel's suspension from ABC sparked an immediate and heated debate over the First Amendment and censorship. To be clear, television networks are legally allowed to suspend or cancel any shows they want, and they have a long history of doing so when it comes to controversies involving their stars or cast members. But Kimmel's suspension was different because it involved a mix of politics, the president, and the power of his administration when it comes to its critics. In this next hour, CNN's Jake Tapper walks us through how the decision to suspend Kimmel unfolded the role of the FCC, ABC's affiliate stations, and its parent company, Disney, and he speaks to leading First Amendment scholars about the direction we're heading when it comes to free speech.

CNN ANNOUNCER: This is CNN breaking news.

BORIS SANCHEZ [on *CNN News Central*, 09/10/25]: We're breaking news to CNN. Trump ally and the founder of Turning Point USA, Charlie Kirk was shot at an event on a college campus in Utah.

COOPER [on CNN's *AC360*, 09/10/25]: Conservative activist Charlie Kirk, only 31- years-old, has been killed after being shot in the neck in an apparent assassination.

BRIANNA KEILAR [on *CNN News Central*, date N/A]: From Utah to Arizona, New York, and D.C., mourners have been gathering at vigils.

JAKE TAPPER: What does the Charlie Kirk murder say, if anything, about the state of free speech in America and the state of free speech on college campuses?

FIRE PRESIDENT GREG LUKIANOFF: It's a scary moment for those of us who have always explained that speech is not violence. Speech is the best cure for violence ever invented. So, a lot of us were just genuinely horrified, even those of us who were critical of Charlie for any number of reasons, that someone should get killed for going to argue with students on campus.

TAPPER: The attack on Charlie Kirk came amidst years of concerns over suppressed speech on college campuses. Many see his tragic killing as a watershed moment, and it pushed beyond universities. People from all walks of life, politicians, celebrities, expressed their sadness, including this sentiment from Jimmy Kimmel on September 11th, the day after Kirk's horrific murder.

JIMMY KIMMEL [on ABC's *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*, 09/11/25]: Like the rest of the country, we're still trying to wrap our heads around the senseless murder of the popular podcaster and conservative activist Charlie Kirk yesterday, whose death has amplified our anger, our differences, and I've seen a lot of extraordinarily vile responses to this from both sides of the

political spectrum. Some people are cheering this, which is something I won't ever understand.

JESSICA DEAN [on *CNN Newsroom with Jessica Dean*, date N/A]: The fallout from Charlie Kirk's killing has spread to the workplace. These companies and organizations have reported either terminating or suspending employees for posts about Kirk.

LUKIANOFF: I went on social media and I saw a video of a student in Texas making fun of Charlie Kirk being murdered. I didn't like it. I could see why people would be offended by it.

TAPPER: Within the day, I believe, the governor of Texas —

LUKIANOFF: Yes.

TAPPER: — was weighing in on this student's speech —

LUKIANOFF: Yeah.

TAPPER: — and saying he had been expelled.

LUKIANOFF: Yeah. There was so much emotional opportunity to go after political enemies that they just kind of leapt on it, many politicians on the right.

TAPPER: When it comes to somebody saying this person should not have their job because of their speech —

LUKIANOFF: Yeah.

TAPPER: — is there a difference between the government doing it —

LUKIANOFF: Oh absolutely.

TAPPER: — and other people doing it?

LUKIANOFF: 100 percent. Cancel culture, and just to be clear, it does come from the right and left and it always has, but when you talking about actual official government pressure to punish someone, that's just good old-fashioned authoritarian censorship.

TAPPER: And on the night of Monday, September 15, this moment on Jimmy Kimmel Live seems to have caught the attention of the U.S. government.

KIMMEL [on ABC's *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*, 09/15/25]: At least it's somebody we can trust though, right? 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. In between the finger pointing, there was grieving.

TAPPER: This aired several hours before the Utah County Attorney's Office filed formal charges against Utah native Tyler Robinson. In those charging documents, more details emerged about the alleged killer and his possible motive. Kimmel went on to make light of the president and his reaction.

KIMMEL [on ABC's *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*, 09/15/25]: On Friday, the White House flew the flags at half-staff, which got some criticism, but on a human level, you can see how hard the president is taking this.

UNIDENTIFIED REPORTER [TO TRUMP]: My condolences on the loss of your friend Charlie Kirk. May I ask, sir, personally, how are you holding up over the last day and a half, sir?

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: I think very good. And by the way, right there you see all the trucks. They just started construction of the new ballroom for the White House, which is something they've been trying to get, as you know, for about 150 years, and it's going to be a beauty.

KIMMEL [on ABC's *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*, 09/15/25]: Yes. He is at the fourth stage of grief, construction.

BILL CARTER: It probably was a joke that would upset the president, because a lot of jokes upset him, but in this case, he looked very callous.

TAPPER: It turns out, Jimmy Kimmel upset many people that night.

DAVID URBAN: I think that it was just too soon, right? So, if you want to make fun of Donald Trump, the President of the United States, have at it, right? He is a public figure. He is fair game, but to talk about the potential shooter as being MAGA with no basis, in fact. So, I think what people found reprehensible just the joking in general about some young person's death so shortly thereafter.

TAPPER: Kimmel insists he wasn't calling the shooter MAGA, but either way, it certainly was not the first time people were offended by what they saw on network television.

BRIAN STELTER: TV shows get canceled all the time. But usually, the tension is only between the stars and the producers versus the network or the distributor. This time, there was a third party, the government. This Kimmel story was different because of the government pressure.

TAPPER: Here is the moment that changed the conversation.

FCC CHAIRMAN BRENDAN CARR [on *The Benny Show*, 09/17/25]: When you look at the conduct that has taken place by Jimmy Kimmel, it appears to be some of the sickest conduct possible.

TAPPER: This is Federal Communications Commission Chairman Brendan Carr on *The Benny*

Show podcast, a pro-MAGA podcast, two days after Kimmel's controversial comment.

CARR: Frankly, when you see stuff like this, I mean, look, we can do this the easy way or the hard way. These companies can find ways to change conduct, to take action, frankly, on Kimmel, or there is going to be additional work for the FCC ahead.

ELIE HONIG: It's hard to think of a clearer example of the government crossing that line into coercion than when Brendan Carr says we can do this the easy way or the hard way. That's a textbook example of what the courts have said would violate the First Amendment.

CARR: There is actions that we can take on licensed broadcasters. And frankly, I think that it's really sort of past time that a lot of these licensed broadcasters themselves push back on Comcast and Disney and say, listen, we are going to preempt. We are not going to run Kimmel anymore, until you straighten this out because we, a licensed broadcaster, are running the possibility of fines or license revocation from the FCC if we continue to run content that ends up being a pattern of news distortion. It's time for them to step up and say this garbage, to the extent that that's what comes down the pipe in the future, isn't something that we think serves the needs of our local communities. But —

JIM RUTENBERG: Because I've spent so much time myself studying FCC policy over the years, I knew immediately that that had to do with whether the FCC would investigate these stations for proper conduct, which the FCC is allowed to do. What that implies is, if these stations aren't properly serving the public interest in their communities, now being defined by Chairman Carr of the FCC is something very specific about how they treat President Trump, then they might have to worry about their television station licenses. There is no one in the television business that did not hear it that way. How broadcast television works is you have these big national networks, ABC, CBS and NBC. They rely on deals they have with stations all around the country, and these stations are what carry their national programming into every nook and cranny of the country. Those television stations are licensed by the government.

TAPPER: The same day Chairman Carr spoke on that podcast, dominoes started to fall at a shocking clip.

KATE BOLDUAN: The FCC Chair suggested that his agency may revoke affiliate licenses, and hours later, two broadcast groups had announced that they would preempt or pull Kimmel's show from 62 TV markets or regions.

ELIZABETH WAGMEISTER: Nexstar was the first station group to say that we are refusing to air Jimmy Kimmel Live tonight.

CARTER: Sinclair, a very conservative organization, upped the ante by saying he has to do an apology and he has to make a donation to Turning Point, Charlie Kirk's organization.

TAPPER: Nexstar is the largest owner of local TV stations in the country, and is also trying to purchase another major broadcast media company called Tegna for \$6.2 billion. Nexstar not only

needs the FCC and Brendan Carr to approve this merger of its next largest rival, but to change the rules to allow them to do so.

FCC COMMISSIONER ANNA GOMEZ: By law, broadcasters cannot reach more than 39 percent of the households in our country. If they succeed in purchasing Tegna, they will reach 80 percent of those households. So, they will be asking the FCC to lift that cap.

TAPPER: When an FCC Chair says something like local affiliates should do X, there is this context of the owners of those local affiliates might need the FCC Chair on their side for big, lucrative business decisions, right?

GOMEZ: Yes. When the FCC threatens to take enforcement action, companies pick up their ears.

TAPPER: And they might act.

GOMEZ: Yeah. They want to curry favor with the FCC. They want to be on their good side.

TAPPER: After the local stations decided to boycott Jimmy Kimmel Live, ABC network and its parent company, Disney, soon followed.

COOPER [on CNN's *AC360*, 09/17/25]: The breaking news, ABC, the network pulling Jimmy Kimmel from the air, a network spokesperson saying simply, Jimmy Kimmel Live will be preempted indefinitely. Just moments ago, the administration's rapid response media team posted this online, which reads, "They're doing their viewers a favor. Jimmy is a sick freak." CNN Chief Media Analyst Brian Stelter. You reached out to FCC Chairman Carr. What did he tell you?

STELTER [on CNN's *AC360*, 09/17/25]: And he sent me the gift that we will put on screen, Anderson. It's a picture from the old NBC sitcom *The Office*. So, he is celebrating Disney's capitulation here.

COOPER [on CNN's *AC360*, 09/17/25]: Wait a minute, Brian. We're putting this on the screen. The Chairman of the FCC sent you this video?

STELTER [on CNN's *AC360*, 09/17/25]: Correct. [TO TAPPER] In all my years reporting on the FCC, I've never received a GIF as a statement. I shared that gif on X. It was reposted and reshared, ends up having millions of views, and it gets his point across better than any statement could.

TRUMP: Well, Jimmy Kimmel was fired because he had bad ratings more than anything else.

WAGMEISTER: Based on my reporting, that is just simply not true. Jimmy was never taken off the air because of bad ratings.

TRUMP [on 09/18/25]: The guy had no talent. Kimmel had — look, he was fired. He had no talent. He is a whack job. That host is on network television. There is a license. I'll give you an

example. I read someplace that the networks were 97 percent against me, again, 97 percent negative. And then they're 97 percent against. They give me holy bad publicity or press. I mean, they're getting a license, I would think, maybe their license should be taken away. It will be up to Brendan Carr.

TAPPER: If you notice there, the President just segued from comedy he doesn't like to network news he doesn't like. [TO GOMEZ] Do you think that Brendan Carr, as Chair of the FCC, has weaponized the FCC?

GOMEZ: I think this administration is weaponizing every agency it has under its power right now, and it has asserted that even though the FCC is an independent agency, that it has to do its will. And so, we are using our leverage over private companies to do this administration's will.

TAPPER: How serious an offense against the First Amendment, do you think, it is what happened to Jimmy Kimmel? I can't think of anything where government was more directly and openly threatening.

LUKIANOFF: Yeah. One of the things that I found so remarkable about the whole Jimmy Kimmel thing was how upfront the head of the FCC was, how upfront Trump himself was, saying that it's the stated goal of my administration to get rid of a late-night comedian. That I'm not familiar with in American history. There have been presidents, to be clear, who are not good on freedom of speech. They tended not to brag about it, though.

TAPPER: Or if there were fingerprints, you didn't see them.

LUKIANOFF: Yeah. That's one of the fascinating things about the Trump administration, is when they violate the First Amendment and potentially could get away with it because people don't know the leverage they pulled, Trump himself seems to want to take credit for the cancellation, the person getting in trouble, the person getting fired.

(...)

9:16:21 p.m.

8 minutes and 23 seconds

[JIMMY FALLON CLIP]

[STEPHEN COLBERT CLIP]

TAPPER: Less than 24 hours after Jimmy Kimmel was suspended, the tight-knit fraternity of late-night hosts rallied around their comedic brother.

[JON STEWART CLIP]

COLBERT: And to Jimmy, just let me say, I stand with you and your staff 100 percent, and also

you couldn't let me enjoy this for like one week. Just, come on.

CARTER: One of the interesting things about late-night now is that it's not competitive anymore. Now the hosts are best friends, really, and Trump hates all of them.

WAGMEISTER: They also understood that this could be me next.

TAPPER: It's something Trump threatened soon after Kimmel's suspension, going after two more late-night hosts who also air on network television, "That leaves Jimmy and Seth, two total losers on Fake News NBC. Their ratings are also horrible. Do it NBC!!!"

[JIMMY FALLON CLIP]

[SETH MEYERS CLIP]

TAPPER: How worried should others be, whether it's other late-night comedians or journalists?

GOMEZ: What I worry about is the corporate capitulation. They are thinking about their bottom line dollars, and while they're doing so, they're affecting our democracy and not thinking about the greater good.

TAPPER: The threats did not silence these comedians, nor did they silence others. There was a celebrity petition, theme park protests and customer boycotts.

STELTER: We don't know how many people dropped their Disney+ or Hulu subscriptions as a result of all this. But here is the thing, Disney does know. Disney has all the data. Disney is a squeaky-clean, all-American brand. So, the idea that there are free speech protesters outside the gates of Disneyland, that's a worst-case scenario for Disney. This is the kind of scandal that the company always tries to avoid.

WAGMEISTER: If you have people either from the right or from the left who are upset, that can deeply impact Disney. It's not just about Jimmy Kimmel Live. It's about Disneyland. It's about the resorts. There is so much money, billions of dollars, on the line.

TAPPER: Influential podcaster Joe Rogan, who endorsed Trump, weighed in.

JOE ROGAN: Like, first of all, I definitely don't think that the government should be involved ever in dictating what a comedian can or cannot say in a monologue. That's [EXPLETIVE] crazy.

ANDREW SANTINO: Crazy.

TAPPER: Even some Republican officials who abhorred Kimmel's comments and Kimmel himself spoke out in defense of free speech.

SENATOR RAND PAUL (R-KY): Absolutely inappropriate. Brendan Carr has got no business weighing in on this.

SENATOR TED CRUZ (R-TX) [on *The Verdict with Ted Cruz*, 09/19/25]: And I got to say he threatens it. He says we can do this the easy way, but we can do this the hard way.

BEN FERGUSON [on *The Verdict with Ted Cruz*, 09/19/25]: Yeah.

CRUZ [on *The Verdict with Ted Cruz*, 09/19/25]: And I've got to say, that's right out of *Goodfellas*.

CARTER: When a lot of support was happening for Kimmel, in unexpected places, that gave Disney cover.

TAPPER: Just days after Kimmel was taken off the air, Carr himself began trying to distance the FCC from the suspension.

CARR: What I've been very clear in the context of the Kimmel episode is the FCC and myself, in particular, have expressed no view on the ultimate merits.

JEFF ZELENY: There is no doubt that Brendan Carr was also backtracking a touch, perhaps more than anyone else in the administration. He heard the blowback, particularly, I think, from Ted Cruz. I mean, Ted Cruz is a constitutional lawyer. He is a constitutional scholar, agree with him or disagree with him. This is his area of expertise.

JEFFREY TOOBIN: Carr backing down was a meaningful lesson in what happens when you push back against bullies. Bullies back down, and that's what Carr did.

TAPPER: All the while, Disney was watching and listening, and they apparently never shut Kimmel out of the conversation.

STELTER: Once Kimmel was spotted by paparazzi heading to a high-priced lawyer's office in Century City, it was clear this was going to be a negotiation.

WAGMEISTER: Those conversations never got overly heated. Jimmy Kimmel was never irate with Disney. That's a word that a source told me. Of course, things got tense and they got heated, but there was always conversations about how we can move forward and how we can bring back this show. By Monday, Disney had announced that they were bringing back Jimmy Kimmel.

TAPPER: It was the same Jimmy Kimmel —

KIMMEL: I'm not sure who had a weirder 48 hours, me or the CEO of Tylenol.

TAPPER: — laughter mixed with emotion —

KIMMEL [on ABC's *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*, 09/23/25]: But I do want to make something clear, because it's important to me as a human and that is, you understand that it was never my intention to make light of the murder of a young man. I don't think — there is anything funny about it.

TAPPER: — even thanking his Strange Bedfellows.

KIMMEL [on ABC's *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*, 09/23/25]: I want to thank the people who don't support my show and what I believe, but support my right to share those beliefs anyway. I never would have imagined, like Ben Shapiro, Clay Travis, Candace Owens, Mitch McConnell, Rand Paul, even my old pal, Ted Cruz.

LUKIANOFF: The glimmer that I saw of hope, the fact that he was able to point to so many conservatives who said no.

KIMMEL [on ABC's *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*, 09/23/25]: It takes courage for them to speak out against this administration. They did, and they deserve credit for it, and thanks —

TAPPER: Was Jimmy Kimmel's return to the airwaves a good sign for free speech?

LUKIANOFF: One thing that always happens is when you try to silence somebody in a free society, you tend to increase interest in what that person actually said. You actually give them a giant megaphone. So, if nothing else, when there is a temptation to go after a late-night host again, remember that sometimes if you strike these people down, they come back stronger than ever.

TAPPER: I couldn't watch the Jimmy Kimmel monologue here in Washington, D.C., because WJLA, our local ABC affiliate, is a Sinclair station. Is that censorship?

LUKIANOFF: I consider that to be censorship, because it was really clear that there was pressure on them to do this from — the illegitimate pressure from the government.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: Yes, here for Jimmy. I'm so excited he is back.

TAPPER: And while more people are right now watching Kimmel than ever, especially since Sinclair and Nexstar began allowing Kimmel to air on their agency affiliates again, it's clear this fight is not over.

KIMMEL [on ABC's *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*, 09/23/25]: And it's not just common. He is gunning for our journalists who he is suing them. He is bullying them. Over the weekend, his Foxy friend Pete Hegseth announced a new policy that requires journalists with Pentagon press credentials to sign a pledge promising not to report information that hasn't been explicitly authorized for release. That includes unclassified information. They want to pick and choose what the news is. I know that's not as interesting as muzzling a comedian, but it's so important to have a free press, and it is nuts that we aren't paying more attention to it.

MAGGIE HABERMAN: It's not clear exactly what the president has in mind, but I would note that he is pretty clearly saying that the government is going to weigh in in some way.

TRUMP: Brendan Carr doesn't like to see the airwaves be used illegally and incorrectly.

TOOBIN: He is clearly committed to using his power as the president to regulate the speech that goes on the air.

TAPPER: Coming up, the long history of comedians making fun of politicians —

JOHNNY CARSON [on NBC's *The Tonight Show*, date N/A]: The last time George Bush made a speech, somebody came up and drew a chalk outline around his body.

TAPPER: — and how those politicians have reacted in the past.

(...)

9:28:12 p.m.

10 minutes and 6 seconds

ABC ANNOUNCER: And now, Jimmy Kimmel.

TAPPER: Long before the Jimmy Kimmel firestorm, political comedy was already a late-night staple. But when it came to roasting presidents, hosts such as *The Tonight Show*'s Johnny Carson chose punchlines over personal attacks or political messages.

CARSON: The last time George Bush made his speech, somebody came up and drew a chalk outline around his body.

RUTENBERG: Johnny Carson famously could gently rib whatever president was in power, but he kind of stayed above the partisan wars of that era, though those partisan wars were much gentler.

TAPPER: Presidents have long been fair game for late-night comics —

JAY LENO [on NBC's *The Tonight Show*, date N/A]: Happy Monica Day, everybody.

TAPPER: — from the Bill Clinton scandal riffed on relentlessly by *The Tonight Show*'s Jay Leno —

LENO [on NBC's *The Tonight Show*, date N/A]: Well, Bill Clinton said he had the affair with Monica Lewinsky because he could. Ironically, that's the same reason Bush gave her invading Iraq.

DAVID LETTERMAN [on CBS's *The Late Show with David Letterman*, date N/A]: The

opening of the Clinton Presidential Library, did you hear about this?

TAPPER: — or The Late Show’s David Letterman, and his mocking of President George W. Bush’s intellect.

LETTERMAN [on CBS’s *The Late Show with David Letterman*, date N/A]: President Bush actually was very excited to be there because he’d never been to a library before.

TAPPER: Jon Stewart, in 1999, was a new late-night host who burst onto the scene with an even harder edge to his jokes on Comedy Central’s Daily Show —

GEORGE W. BUSH [date N/A]: I’m not an Iraqi citizen.

STEWART [on Comedy Central’s *The Daily Show*, date N/A]: Look, I’m just the guy who invaded the country and destroyed their army and had Saddam arrested at gunpoint. You know, it’s not my call.

CARTER: Jon Stewart really changed it. Jon Stewart brought big time point of view to Late Night.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: Paul Wolfowitz who is the chief architect of one of the most unpopular wars in our history —

BUSH: That’s actually an interesting start.

TAPPER: — a point of view targeting his niche progressive audience. Today’s late-night hosts do not shy away from political commentary the way their predecessors would. They found success taking shots at conservative politicians. Jon Stewart led the way for Stephen Colbert —

STEWART: We’re going to take him down there now live to Stephen Colbert.

TAPPER: — who clawed his way from *The Daily Show* correspondent —

COLBERT [on Comedy Central’s *The Colbert Report*, date N/A]: This is *The Colbert Report*.

TAPPER: — to late-night king, turning political satire into appointment television for his viewers —

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Live election night.

TAPPER: — and it started on the night Donald Trump was elected.

COLBERT [on CBS’s *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, 11/08/16]: Thank you. You don’t need to chant my name. America doesn’t have dictators yet.

CARTER: Stephen Colbert decided to do a live show in 2016, fully expecting Hillary Clinton to win.

COLBERT [on CBS's *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, 11/08/16]: Still don't know, right?

CARTER: And as the returns are coming in live, he is getting more and more upset.

COLBERT [on CBS's *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, 11/08/16]: On our map, when Trump wins the state, it will turn bright orange.

TAPPER: Colbert tried to keep the jokes coming as the race got closer and closer.

COLBERT [on CBS's *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, 11/08/16]: This one is a nail-biter and a passport grabber.

CARTER: It was very riveting television, actually. You're seeing someone's emotions switching live in front of you.

COLBERT [on CBS's *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, 11/08/16]: Would you care for a cocktail?

TAPPER: And when the results were in —

COLBERT [on CBS's *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, 11/08/16]: Donald Trump has taken the state of Florida. That's a horrifying prospect. I can't put a happy face on that, and that's my job.

CARTER: It was very hard for him to be funny because he was upset.

TAPPER: Colbert's progressive viewpoint and harsh attacks on Trump galvanized his liberal viewers who agreed with his point of view, catapulting him and *The Late Show* to its biggest ratings victory in two decades.

COLBERT [on CBS's *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, 11/08/16]: Donald Trump, if you're watching, first of all, you're a bad president, please resign. Second of all —

TAPPER: Colbert edged out longtime rival Jimmy Fallon when he ripped apart Trump's first solo press conference.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: I inherited a mess.

COLBERT [on CBS's *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, date N/A]: No. You inherited a fortune. We elected a mess.

TAPPER: President Trump, in many ways, gave new life to all the late-night hosts, *The Tonight*

Show's Jimmy Fallon —

FALLON [on NBC's *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*, date N/A]: Buckle up, because I'm coming in hot. Daddy came to play.

TAPPER: — and of course, Jimmy Kimmel.

KIMMEL: Trump said he believes in torturing prisoners, which is bad news for Melania and —

TAPPER: — John Oliver, another Daily Show veteran, devoted a huge chunk of HBO Last Week Tonight to Trump fact-checking.

JOHN OLIVER [on HBO's *Last Week Tonight*, date N/A]: PolitiFact found that just over a quarter of President Obama's statements that they evaluated were some degree or false. But with Trump, that number is currently over two thirds. Perhaps that is why one reporter who has been covering Trump found himself saying this.

SENATOR BOB CORKER (R-TN): This is what makes it covering Donald Trump so very difficult. What does he mean when he says words?

OLIVER [on HBO's *Last Week Tonight*, date N/A]: Wow.

TAPPER: *Saturday Night Live* veteran Seth Meyers followed suit with his own show.

MEYERS [on NBC's *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, date N/A]: His tweets would make more sense if they were scribbled on the wall of a psych ward.

CARTER: Trump was the major story every week. He is like a mime producing raw material.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: And now, a message from the President of the United States.

TAPPER: Speaking of *Saturday Night Live*, they had almost too much material.

CARTER: Lorne Michaels does not particularly like heavy political comedy, but when it's there and it's inescapable, he has to do it. He brought on Alec Baldwin. It was clearly funny, and it was kind of vicious.

UNIDENTIFIED FEMALE: He says climate change is a hoax invented by China.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: It's pronounced China.

WAGMEISTER: Donald Trump hates this. He actually hate tweets during *SNL*, and in his first term, he would essentially live tweet through the episodes to call them unfunny. But for *SNL*, this, at one time, resulted in gangbuster ratings.

TAPPER: President Trump does not like to be mocked, and his distaste for late-night TV intensified. Still, the comedians did not let up.

MEYERS [on NBC's *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, date N/A]: President Trump this afternoon gave a press conference that can only be described as clinically insane.

KIMMEL [on ABC's *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*, date N/A]: Donald Trump has now made more than 10,000 false or misleading public statements, 10. He is not just a pathological liar. He is now a mythological liar.

COLBERT [on CBS's *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, 05/01/17]: The Mr. Trump, your presidency. I love your presidency. I call it "Disgrace the Nation."

TAPPER: In 2017, Stephen Colbert found himself in hot water when he blasted Trump in an over the top profanity-laden monologue.

COLBERT [on CBS's *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, 05/01/17]: The only thing your mouth is good for is being Vladimir Putin's [EXPLETIVE] holster.

TAPPER: The tirade sparked a conservative firestorm, fueling a #FireColbert on Twitter. The President slammed Colbert in a Time magazine interview, stating, "The guy was dying. By the way, they were going to take him off television, then he started attacking me, and he started doing better." Colbert's response was, to say the least, effusive.

COLBERT [on CBS's *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, 05/11/17]: The President of the United States has personally come after me and my show, and there is only one thing to say.

TAPPER: The back and forth between comedians and Trump grew increasingly heated. The President often lashed out on social media. Back then, it was part of the daily discourse. But now, after the tragic killing of Charlie Kirk, Trump's Attorney General vowed to go as far as prosecuting people for what she called hate speech.

ATTORNEY GENERAL PAM BONDI: There is free speech and then there is hate speech, and there is no place, especially now, especially after what happened to Charlie in our society. We will absolutely target you, go after you if you are targeting anyone with hate speech, anything, and that's across the aisle.

LUKIANOFF: Pam Bondi definitely got the law regarding hate speech wrong. Hate speech is not unprotected speech in the U.S., nor should it be. The attorney general should not be saying, I'm going to punish you for hate speech.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: What do you make of Pam Bondi saying she is going to go after hate speech? Is that — I mean, a lot of people — a lot of your allies say hate speech is free speech.

TRUMP: We probably go after people like you because you treat me so unfairly. It's hate. You

have a lot of hate in your heart.

TAPPER: But Attorney General Bondi walked back her comments after an outcry from both liberals and conservatives who saw this as a violation, potentially, of the First Amendment. [TO LUKIANOFF] There is a push-pull in American history. We like to think of ourselves as this country that has always respected freedom of speech —

LUKIANOFF: I wish.

TAPPER: — and one of my favorite Founding Fathers is this guy, Benjamin Franklin Bache, who ran the Aurora —

LUKIANOFF: Yes.

TAPPER: — Advertiser newspaper in Philadelphia, vicious to George Washington.

LUKIANOFF: Absolutely vicious.

TAPPER: Some people think that the reason George Washington only served two terms was because he got sick of being personally attacked.

LUKIANOFF: Yeah.

TAPPER: So, it's not a given.

LUKIANOFF: No, not at all.

TAPPER: The story of Philadelphia publisher Benjamin Franklin Bache in the 1790s is instructive. He published the Aurora Advertiser, and that paper was fiercely critical of President George Washington, reporting on the fact that he had slaves, reporting on the fact that he used the Treasury as his own personal bank account. But then came in President John Adams, who did not like the aggressive journalism, and he threw Bache in prison where he died. We like to think of ourselves in the United States as being this beacon of free speech, but the true history is much more complicated.

CHIEF JUSTICE JOHN ROBERTS [on 01/20/25]: Please raise your right hand and repeat —

TAPPER: When President Trump was sworn into office for the second time, he claimed he would be one of the presidents who would protect that ideal of free speech.

TRUMP: I will also sign an executive order to immediately stop all government censorship and bring back free speech to America.

TAPPER: Vice President J.D. Vance went so far as to take that promise abroad, touting America's unwavering commitment to free speech.

VICE PRESIDENT J.D. VANCE [on 02/14/25]: We shouldn't be afraid of our people even when they express views that disagree with their leadership.

TAPPER: And in this second term, President Trump seems determined to try out a new tactic to control the free press.

(....)

9:42:47 p.m.

9 minutes and 14 seconds

TRUMP: I have a running war with the media. They are among the most dishonest human beings on earth. *The New York Times* is scum. They're bad people. They're sick. You're gutless losers. I say that to CNN because I watch it. I have no choice. I got to watch this garbage. It's all garbage. It's all fake news.

TAPPER: Though President Trump has made his disdain for the media a hallmark of his presidency, he is hardly the first president to try to undermine commentary he does not like.

TIM NAFTALI: So, what you have is the impulse, the presidential impulse, to censor.

PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA [date N/A]: One television station entirely devoted to attacking my administration.

TAPPER: President Obama made no secret of his disdain for Fox News, trying to ice them out from interviews and publicly dismissing the network as "destructive to the country." [TO LUKIANOFF] Back in 2009, during the Obama administration, I took issue with the White House labeling Fox News not a legitimate news organization.

LUKIANOFF: Yeah.

TAPPER: Do you see that in any way as an infringement on the First Amendment?

LUKIANOFF: I think it is bad practice. I think it's definitely the idea that if we're supposed to be a republic that cares about our press, we don't do things like that. I didn't like what Obama did, and I haven't liked what the administration has done to CNN, for example.

GOMEZ: It really is not the same thing. What we did not see in the prior administrations was them using their levers of power in order to get companies to acquiesce to their demands. You saw criticisms, and you are seeing criticisms too, but you are seeing outright threats from this administration to use the FCC's licensing authority, the FTC, the Department of Justice, whatever lever of power they have in order to get broadcasters to change their practices. That is not what you saw in those administrations.

PRESIDENT JOE BIDEN [date N/A]: The outrageous misinformation about the vaccine.

TAPPER: President Biden faced his own accusations of censorship, most notably when his administration tried to control what social media companies allowed to be posted during the pandemic.

LUKIANOFF: Completely inappropriate, and I wish it got better coverage at the time that essentially the government is leaning on you as a private entity to censor speech that the government itself is forbidden from censoring under the First Amendment.

TAPPER: The Biden administration would say, hey, we were just trying to keep dangerous medical advice out of the public realm.

LUKIANOFF: Yeah, and I think that if in COVID we treated the American public like adults who can have discussions and can actually figure out what the truth is for themselves, like you should treat your public in a free and democratic society, we'd be facing a lot less skepticism of expertise right now, for example, like the lab leak theory that we treated at the time as if it were absolute blasphemy, heresy, and obviously already proven wrong.

TAPPER: The lab leak theory is really like, why is that dangerous to discuss?

LUKIANOFF: The thing that people didn't quite get about the sort of rapid and vehement rejection of the lab leak theory was it wasn't that any of us knew whether or not it was true. It's that we knew that they definitely didn't know for sure. I understand that the Biden administration believed it was doing it with the best of intentions, but censors always think they're acting with the best of intentions.

TAPPER: But until Trump, perhaps no president hated the news media more than Richard Nixon.

WALTER CRONKITE [date N/A]: The possible injury done to the country's delicate election process will not be satisfied with mere denials.

RUTENBERG: It was a big deal when Walter Cronkite started to talk about Watergate, and the Nixon administration understood that was a big deal.

TRUMP: We have to straighten out the press. Our press is very corrupt, almost as corrupt as our elections.

KIMMEL: Walter Cronkite must be spinning in his grave right now. He is dead, right?

RUTENBERG: We have never seen a president and an administration take the fight against the press this far, to be this aggressive, to be this openly working to silence voices that they don't want to hear.

TRUMP: I sued them, and we call it election interference.

CARTER: Trump has a fundamental strategy for going after media, which is, I'm going to sue you, I'm going to push you around, and I'll get a settlement, and then I'll be able to claim I won. That's his strategy.

HABERMAN: This is actually what he did as a private citizen. What is unusual is seeing a president do it.

JOHN BERMAN [on *CNN News Central*, date N/A]: All right. We do have breaking news.

CHRISTIANE AMANPOUR [on CNN International/PBS's *Amanapour & Company*, date N/A]: The press is facing legal assault from the incoming president, Donald Trump. He is suing the *Des Moines Register* newspaper over its covering polling which showed Kamala Harris ahead in Iowa days before the election.

HONIG: That is a ridiculous lawsuit. First of all, it's a poll. They're reporting the results of what people said when they asked them the poll question. There is no falsity to it.

TOOBIN: The lawsuit against the *Des Moines Register* was so frivolous and so crazy that it was a good signal of the fact that Trump was going to just try to change the rules about what the press can say.

TRUMP [date N/A]: CBS is no good. And in fact, in honor of you, I just sued CBS today because of *60 Minutes*.

HONIG: The *60 Minutes* lawsuit, to me, is one of the most ridiculous defamation cases I've ever seen. The allegation essentially was you, 60 Minutes, edited an interview of my opponent in a way that made my opponent look better, which in turn hurt me. You have to show that they lied about you in a way that harmed you. Those are two different things. But I'm certain that Donald Trump would have lost that case if it went to court.

TOOBIN: The corporate powers that be thought, let's just pay the money and make this problem go away, which is what happens when companies value their financial situation more than the First Amendment values their journalists are trying to protect.

CBS ANNOUNCER: It's Stephen Colbert.

WAGMEISTER: Paramount had settled with Trump for \$16 million and Stephen Colbert came back on his show, and he came back swinging.

COLBERT: As someone who has always been a proud employee of this network. I'm offended, and I don't know if anything will ever repair my trust in this company. But just taking a stab at it, I'd say \$16 million would help. This settlement —

TAPPER: A few days after Colbert criticized that settlement decision, his parent company announced that the Colbert show would be permanently retired in 2026. They called it a purely

financial decision. Shortly after that, the FCC approved Paramount's high-stakes merger with Skydance Media.

TOOBIN: The CBS settlement was like a vending machine. They put \$16 million in and they got a merger out.

GOMEZ: The timing is very interesting, right? They committed to get rid of the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion programs, which I think is a problem under this First Amendment. And then they also agreed to install an ombudsperson to field bias complaints. Now, they did that in order to get the FCC to approve its transaction. I consider that to be a violation of the First Amendment if it was under pressure from the FCC. I don't know whether it was. I don't know whether Colbert was a pressure point. But once they agreed to do those things, the FCC immediately turned to approve it.

TAPPER: You were the lone dissenting voice. Why?

GOMEZ: I was really alarmed by the commitment to install the ombudsperson. I really felt like that was the FCC imposing its will on a company. And then when you hear people say, well, we're going to watch what they do, and if they don't follow through on in way that we like, then we'll take enforcement action against them. That's the FCC censoring their content.

TRUMP: I think the license should be taken away from CBS.

TAPPER: The Trump people would say, why are you lumping lawsuits in with this? Any American has the right to bring any lawsuit they want against a media company.

LUKIANOFF: You can't find another example of a U.S. president filing defamation lawsuits against newspapers for coverage he doesn't like. Now, for example, The Wall Street Journal case, when they were talking about that birthday note that Trump sent to Epstein, they sued The Wall Street Journal for, I think, billions of dollars. It was off the charts. And they've repeated this pattern over and over again.

TRUMP: It's not my signature and it's not the way I speak. What does The Wall Street Journal know? I'm meeting with them tomorrow. What does the Wall Street Journal now? They've been wrong about everything.

ZELENY: Other presidents have been frustrated by the press. There is no doubt about it. President Trump has acted on it in so many different ways, and it has changed how Americans get their information about what's going on. It's coming at a moment where the media industry is also at one of its weakest points financially. So, President Trump also is aware of that and seizes upon that, not about reporters being able to ask questions. It's not about that. It's about Americans being able to get the answers, and that, I think, is at risk.

TRUMP: Our predecessors turned this Department of Justice into the Department of Injustice.

TAPPER: Trump's battles go beyond the media. That's next.

(....)

9:55:11 p.m.

5 minutes and 13 seconds

TRUMP [on 03/14/25]: Well, thank you very much. Thank you.

TAPPER: Two months into his second term, President Trump delivered perhaps one of the most political speeches ever given by a sitting President at the Justice Department.

TRUMP [on 03/14/25]: Our predecessors turned this Department of Justice into the Department of Injustice.

TAPPER: He aired grievances about investigations and prosecutions that targeted him and his campaign.

TRUMP [on 03/14/25]: spied on my campaign, launched one hoax and disinformation operation after another, raided my home, Mar-a-Lago.

TAPPER: He named his political rivals.

TRUMP [on 03/14/25]: Crooked Joe Biden, Deranged Jack Smith, James Comey, Letitia James.

TAPPER: And once again, he blasted media outlets that he could not control.

TRUMP [on 03/14/25]: CNN and MSBNC, they're really corrupt and they're illegal.

TOOBIN: What the President was doing in that March speech was signaling that he wanted to take a firmer hand in deciding whom to prosecute.

HABERMAN: He is willing to use the power of the government in ways we just have not seen before so openly.

TAPPER: In this second term, it continues beyond the media. Trump has engaged in pressure campaigns designed to bend institutions such as universities or top law firms to his will.

TRUMP: These are the most powerful firms in the world, and they just signed whatever I put in front of them.

ZELENY: We've not seen anything like it. There is been sort of a universal falling in line.

TAPPER: Schools such as Columbia or Brown have made deals with the White House, agreeing to massive fines and policy changes, and a number of top law firms have pledged nearly a billion

dollars in pro bono legal work that aligns with the administration's agenda.

URBAN: If you're a private law firm and you helped try to take Donald Trump down, you're going to expect there could be some consequences.

TAPPER: Critics of the President see a pattern, run afoul of the president and his point of view and you'll find yourself paying the price.

HABERMAN: The president is not necessarily himself going after folks more aggressively than he did in term one, and the difference is not in the man. The difference is in what's available to him, an entirely different government now that exists, generally speaking, to do what he wants.

TAPPER: And what he wants is revenge against his perceived political enemies, such as former FBI Director James Comey, who drew the ire of Trump over his handling of investigations into Russian interference in the 2016 election.

KAITLAN COLLINS: Comey is charged with giving a false statement and obstruction of a congressional proceeding relating to the testimony he gave before the Senate Judiciary Committee five years ago.

TAPPER: Comey maintains his innocence, and with Trump's pressure on the Justice Department, more investigations and indictments of his foes are likely to come. While Jimmy Kimmel is back on the air, Charlie Kirk's voice was silenced forever when he was tragically killed, and in this time of escalating partisanship, both sides can at least hopefully agree on this, the First Amendment is a right that is fundamentally American. [TO LUKIANOFF] Are we in an era where free speech is under an attack in a way we haven't seen in a long time?

LUKIANOFF: I'm pretty worried. Right now, I think we are in a perilous stage, and again, we have a President who is willing to use any lever of power against his enemies, whether it violates the First Amendment or not.

TAPPER: What kind of precedent is President Trump setting for a future Democratic president who maybe has the same feeling about free speech that Donald Trump has?

LUKIANOFF: Yeah. We've been trying to get conservatives to look at it, like, what do you think President AOC is going to do with this power? Always think about what your nightmare opponent would do with this power.

URBAN: Republicans, for years and years and years, have always been the stalwarts of free speech and not getting canceled because of your beliefs. Now for conservatives to kind of be the ones looking to cancel people, I think, is a very dangerous rabbit hole to go down.

RUTENBERG: We've seen settlements. We've seen changes in approach to news. The thing we don't know yet is how many smaller outlets are holding their fire, pulling back stories for fear of angering this president.

STELTER: These comics, they believe they have a unique role, and they're right. They do. They are speaking up on behalf of many Americans who don't feel seen right now by the political system. Dissent is democratic, and it's critical at a time when a democracy is backsliding, when it's moving in a more autocratic direction.

KIMMEL [on ABC's *Jimmy Kimmel Live!*, 09/23/25: This show is not important. What is important is that we get to live in a country that allows us to have a show like this.

TAPPER: What do you want people to know, just like that the price for a free society is that sometimes people are going to offend you?

LUKIANOFF: For me, I think that we take freedom of speech for granted and we will really regret when it's gone. Disagreement is difficult. It's all painful stuff. But in a society where we can live in communities that are more politically homogeneous, you shouldn't be surprised that people get somewhat out of practice of disagreement with each other.