

Status's *Power Lines*

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JON PASSANTINO: But first, Bari Weiss is officially taking the reins at CBS News. Oliver, it's good to be back this week, David Ellison, the new Paramount owner, announced that they have acquired The Free Press. This is the Bari Weiss-founded conservative Substack for \$150 million. They installed Bari as the editor-in-chief of CBS News, which has raised a ton of questions, as to what it is that she's going to be doing there. She made her initial foray, if you will, into CBS with a memo to staff, outlining her core journalistic principles, including a commitment to "journalism that holds both American political parties to equal scrutiny" and then she told her Free Press readers that she, you know, we are now going to hold 'a different form of illiberalism emanating from our fringes.' She said, "on the one hand, in America loathing far left" and "on the other a history erasing far right." Ummm, I think you and I were both wondering, well, who? Who on the left exactly loathes America? this is also like a hell of a way to bring in your new editor-in-chief whose job allegedly is to re-establish a center for the country to moderate its news, to be a place where everyone can tune in and get their news, and feel like they're getting a fair shake from both sides of the aisle. But she kicks off this week with her, you know, with her — with her announcement coming from a tiny Substack with a few dozen staffers to running one of the oldest, one of the most established, one of the biggest news organizations in the country by going after the far left and far right. I — I — it's hard for me to like square how that is supposed to set the tone for — for a fairer, more honest CBS News. What do you think?

OLIVER DARCY: Well, it kind of goes back to the strange moves that David Ellison has been making, which is that he said repeatedly he did not want to politicize the company, but he has put in a very polarizing figure as head of CBS News, one who already is attacking the far left as apparently hating America. I was actually really struck by that line and how it was accepted broadly by people without, you know, doing a — you know, look over twice because That's a really remarkable statement to make that — first of all, she offers no detail. So who is she talking about when she says the far left hates America? Um, is it Ilhan Omar? Is it AOC? Is it Zoran Mandami? I mean, who is — who is the far left that hates America? Those are, that's a pretty striking statement for the head of a newsroom to make. And — and, you know, even, even as Donald Trump assaults our bedrock principles of things like free speech as he warps the concept of equal justice under the law by having the DOJ and FBI target his political opponents as he sends in the military into American cities and neighborhoods that — that do not want it. The local representatives are rejecting that kind of force. No one says that he hates America and you can certainly, I think, make a much better case, given all he's doing that he has a disdain for American values and still, I've never heard any major newsroom leader, even the most aggressive, you know, newsrooms don't say that Donald Trump hates America. And so, for Bari Weiss to casually kind of just be like, oh, yeah, the far left hates America. I don't know. That's a pretty — I would love to know more about that, Bari. Who are you referring to? Who are you referring to? That's a really remarkable statement. And for David Ellison, who says he doesn't want to politicize this company, that's — that sure sounds like you're politicizing the newsroom right off the bat. But I think that's par for the course, right, Jon? Like, it seems to me that Bari's

whole MO is presenting a — a false equivalence to audiences that there's an equal extreme on the left as there is on the right, and we're going to tackle both extremes, the — the fringes equally here at CBS News. And yes, that means at times they're going to criticize Trumpism and the excesses of Trumpism, but it seems that they're going to falsely portray that as on balance with some of the things on the left. And I just don't see how you can accurately — I don't think that's an accurate representation of reality. I don't think it's accurate to say that some random congressperson that most people haven't heard of, who's tweeting some fringy things or, you know, edgy things on the internet or whatever or some like protester on a college campus is the same as the President of the United States using the FCC, for instance, to try kicking comedians off the air, like those things are not equal. And it seems to me, judging by how The Free Press has operated, judging by her even saying that they're going to hold both parties to, 'equal accountability' or — or — or — scrutiny, it sounds to me like that's the editorial philosophy they're about to follow.

PASSANTINO: Ellison and his father, Larry Ellison have almost endless limitless money, but the fact that they threw \$150 million at The Free Press — we don't know the exact contours of that deal. It's clear that it's not just like a — a lump sum right at the top, but she's probably going to get this with certain goal marks over a period of time, it's clear that there's a lot of signaling here — right — that we're bringing somebody in who maybe is not, let's say, overtly pro-Trump, like a lot of figures on the right are, but it's sort of like the anti anti-Trump, and so, therefore, she sort of carves out this space where, yes, she is a conservative. Yes, she is in many ways staking out positions that align with Donald Trump and — and Republicans by going after supposed, you know, enemies or positions on the left. Let's say, you know, inflaming or hyperventilating about an issue that is sort of, like, coming from, you know, like — like a far — like, the farthest fringe or non-mainstreamed — non — I don't know, like — like, by just basically making a mountain out of a molehill on some of these smaller issues, and I think that they're very good at that. And, to me, it — this feels like away to signal to this administration and maybe with Larry Ellison's — I mean, I assume Larry Ellison's blessing here, right? It's effectively his money that we're going to put conservative voices on our air, that they're going to get a fairer shake. You know, there had been hand-wringing from, previous Paramount leadership over its coverage of Israel, and we know Bari and The Free Press are just very pro-Israel in their coverage. That is, like, without question. If anything, that's like the one thing that you can really sort of pin them down on in their positioning. But at the same time, like, I — I do think that like there is this clear mismatch, this sort of hypocrisy between this idea that we're now going to be nonpartisan. We don't want to get into those kind of waters, but then coming straight out of the gate like this. I — I also think the way that the staff is handling this is going to be something that's gonna be really fascinating to watch. On Tuesday. She went into the editorial meetings, the 9 o'clock, spoke to the staff at CBS News, and then said, let's do the fucking news. I — I understand that that was sort of met with some eye rolls and maybe some laughter, but she — she is there now, and I — I wonder how moving forward now she is going to function as an editor-in-chief for this, I mean, very large and very matrix news organization. Not only are they, you know, a domestic national news outlet, but they cover international news. They have local affiliates across the country. It's a — it's a big layered organization and with a lot of very high powered talent. She's gonna have to deal with a whole bunch of things going into this, and I — I wonder how you think that the staff is now going to react to this.

DARCY: Well, I mean, I think right now they're just trying to, they're holding their breath, and I think that if you're like on *60 Minutes*, you're hoping that she — she — isn't knee deep in the editorial — right — that she just kind of lets you operate. I — I think that might be wishful thinking, quite frankly, because — you know, it seems that she was brought in to actually blow up the institution to shake things up. And I think we're going to see her making key appointments. It's actually really interesting while she is phoning up her friends and phoning up others and, and, you know, making plans to bring her own people into CBS News, the CBS News president, Tom Cibrowski, who has been there obviously a little longer than her, but he's still pretty new to the job too, he has to find cuts. And because Paramount is going to be making cuts later this fall, I think November is when they're targeting. And so, it's — it's a really interesting juxtaposition there. I do think what you said about her and Trumpism is accurate. She's not like overtly pro-Trump. No one can say she's like part of MAGA Media, but what she does certainly is validate a lot of the things that Trump tells his audience, which mainly is that there's this cultural rot with the elites, right? The elites are not to be trusted, whether that's the press, or whether that's vaccine scientists or whoever, that they should not be trusted. And The Free Press certainly by taking a conservative, contrarian point of view on a number of these issues, has validated a lot of the things that move the MAGA base. And so while she will criticize or The Free Press will run stories that do at times criticize Donald Trump or they're critical of his administration. I mean, the man goes really far on a lot of issues and even at times gets Fox News to tell him like you've gone too far. So, that's that's not really revolutionary stuff, but largely, if you were to read The Free Press, I think you would probably come away thinking, yeah, you know, Donald Trump, he's — he goes a little too far sometimes, but he has a lot of really strong points about things like vaccines or, or, you know, um the media or — or how Israel's covered and — and, you know, that — that I think is — is why she's, in a way, almost more valuable than the people on Fox because she can say I'm critical of Donald Trump, but she really, you know, most of the editorial ends up giving credence to a number of the things he's saying."

PASSANTINO: No, this — her — you — look, The Free Press is a — it's an opinion site, right? There's — it's not a journalistic enterprise. It's not a place that you go to get reporting and news. It's a place where you get takes on the news. She left *The New York Times* in pretty extraordinary fashion where she, you know, painted herself as a victim of, you know, this intolerance from the left, and she goes and starts this outlet, and to her credit, it's very successful. It's making money, or it's bringing in millions of dollars in revenue. I'm not sure about its actual profitability, but —

DARCY: Yeah, I mean, I take issue a little bit with this as well, Jon. There's this idea that this is like an organically created website that's just killing it and The reality is that we don't really know what the books are. I'd be very curious if it's actually making money or if it's still losing money, but this is a well-funded outlet by very wealthy people. This is not some organic news organization that took off the ground, that didn't have any capital that found an audience and has been really killing it like that. This is something that has been funded by very wealthy people who Bari speaks to because she gives, frankly, wealthy white men who feel like they're oppressed a reason to feel like they're oppressed, and they fund her outlet. And so, this idea that she's — I mean — I get — I mean, I don't think starting any business or building any business is easy. Obviously, I respect the entrepreneurial spirit that anyone has to go and do that. But at the same time, I think there's been false picture in the press that this thing is, she's super digital

savvy and that she's built a business that's making a bunch of money and reaching a bunch of people. She's taking — she's taken millions of dollars from other people who are funding this thing. And so, we should be clear about that as well. I, I don't know how organic this thing is. It certainly seems very much like astroturf, you know, influence-buying to me.

PASSANTINO: — yeah. So, this week at Status, we — we talked to a number of reporters or staffers who had worked with her in the past at The Free Press, and a lot of them had some interesting words to say about her management style, the style of the workplace at The Free Press, and um some of them who we spoke to did not have great words to say about how that had been going. They described a chaotic, very rushed, very last minute, you know, push to, to get, you know, stories across the finish line or, you know, I maybe ideas on the page, and you know, some of them described a — a pretty — let's say, you know, uncomfortable or difficult workplace environment. And — and this is for an organization of a few dozen people at this point, and I think that — that does raise real questions as to now what her management ability is going to be like with both high powered talent and a staff who is not necessarily going to be thrilled to welcome her. They're not intentionally joining this conservative anti-woke outlet, and so, you know what? I'm one of the faithful. I am so thrilled to be here. I can cast aside that this is a startup and that things are gonna be a little challenging, you know, a little hairy at times. I'm all in. Instead, it's, she's coming into an established news organization like CBS and — and they're looking at her and they're gonna say, what? And now, you know — now, you want me to do what? I'm really curious how — how — how she functions as a manager now and — and — and now — how these, how these very skeptical talent, uh, are going to contend with her.

DARCY: If I had to guess, reading the tea leaves here, I think that David Ellison and company don't really care if they lose some talent in the process, similar to how Jeff Bezos seems to not give one damn about the astonishing talent exodus that's happened at his paper under his new publisher, Will Lewis. I — I tend to think that it's really going to be something similar to that and there will probably be backbiting, there will probably be damaging leaks. But at least for now, David Ellison unequivocally backs Bari Weiss, and she reports directly to him. And so, I'm not sure they're going to care.

PASSANTINO: Yeah, look, my, my Free Press hot take here —

DARCY: Okay?

PASSANTINO: — is that Bari is going to be editor-in-chief in name only, and Tom Cibrowski, who is the president of CBS, is gonna be the one who's actually running the show here.

DARCY: I — see — I don't — I don't — I — I have a hard time thinking that she is the editor-in-chief. It's very public that she is in control of the editorial, which means that anything that happens is going to be on her shoulders. She reports to David Ellison, Tom Cibrowski does not. If I had to guess, she is going to be leading the organization from an editorial perspective while Tom Cibrowski makes sure that the operations work well, that the trains run on time. He understands how to do TV, so I'm sure, you know, there's a lot of work just tech technically and like managing egos and stuff like that, but I think editorially, she's going to be the one in charge.

I mean, she is editor-in-chief, and I have a hard time thinking that she would allow something that would, she would view as a blemish on her own reputation to be aired on CBS News. So, if they're running something, let's say that's in her eyes, anti-Israel, I don't think that's going to be something she'd be happy about and she's going to want to change because now everyone on X or Twitter or social media or whatever is going to say, Bari, you're the editor-in-chief. I don't — I really have a hard time thinking that she's going to — she's not going to be involved here. I think that's why she took it.

PASSANTINO: No, I know — I — I — I think she will definitely be involved and I think that she will definitely be step in on these, let's say these weighty issues around like how do we cover Israel. I — I just — I don't foresee her with her real lack of journalistic history, her lack of managerial history in a — in a real meaningful way, running the newsroom in the day to day like a traditional editor-in-chief does that you would see it like *The Washington Post* or *The Journal* or — or any institution, right? I — I see her more as like she is going to be making sure that tonally, that editorially that the coverage is what the ownership wants, hence the reason why she reports directly to Ellison. And then — then I think that Cibrowski and some of the other top staff there at the at CBS News, they're going to be the ones who are actually running the actual day-to-day. What are, you know, what is the news, a lot of the technical mechanics of just getting the news out. Most — most — like — let's be honest, most of the news that goes out on a daily basis is not something that's ultra controversial, right? Like it's just — it's just here's literally what happened. There are obviously stories though, like ones that covered the administration, let's say the ICE raids that are taking place across the country, the war in — in Gaza, where you could see where she would want to step in there and to put her stamp on that, right? To sort of ensure that it meets her centrist, if you will, standards. And where I'm really curious where that actually works out though, is in a — in a higher stakes, higher visibility space like *60 Minutes*, which has been critical — which provide a really strong lens on the administration's activities, whether or not we'll see some of that toned down and — or — or whether or not the staff there will — will go along with that. I mean, you could see they have, like, a, you know, a really independent spirit to them on that show and we've seen quite a bit of change and turnover there for that reason in recent months, and I'm curious if they're able to, you know, how — how they will contend with her.

DARCY: Yeah, I think that's going to be interesting. I — I — I wonder how long Lesley Stahl and Scott Pelley will be there in particular, and whether there'll be, you know, how she can even attempt to appeal to them. I — I think that remains to be seen, but I do think she will be directing a lot of the coverage, and I think that it would be hard to imagine that she wouldn't have suggestions on which stories should lead the *Evening News* or be covered more or be on the air or on the website or whatever. And so I don't know, I think she'll act like a pretty — I have a hard — I think she's going to be more hands on than people think. I think there's wishful thinking inside CBS News that she will be editor-in-chief in name only. I, I don't feel like that's going to be the case. I really don't.

PASSANTINO: Well, we'll see. I'm — I'm very curious myself.

DARCY: Is she going to like personally edit the stories, Jon? Probably not.

PASSANTINO: No.

DARCY: Maybe on the big ones, maybe on the weighty ones, and that's all that really matters. Like, you — typically in newsrooms, like, the editor-in-chief only weighs in on the big stories, like there's a lot of stuff going on.

PASSANTINO: That's true.

DARCY: They have deputy editors that take care of the — the other stuff, but the big issues that come to them, that bubble up to the top, that's where they weigh in. And I — I have — I have no doubts that Bari's not going to be shy about weighing in.

PASSANTINO: I — I think she is in for a rude awakening though, Oliver. Like, it's one thing to run a Substack where you're telling their audience a lot of what they want to hear. You have — you have a pretense that you are a down-the-road, independent outlet, but realistically you're — you're a conservative or conservative-lite outlet. It's very different to do that in — in a — in a newsroom environment where you have a lot of things and now she's going to be the face of this outlet.

DARCY: Right, but she's at the top?

PASSANTINO: But like one time the right is pissed, they're gonna go, they're gonna blame her for it.

DARCY: Yeah, she's at the top of the organization, so —

PASSANTINO: Right, but she's going to get blamed every time now that there is something that goes out. And I don't think she's gonna love that. There's — there's — there's no way that she's gonna want to be responsible. Well, obviously, a nine-figure payout helps ease that pain just fine. But at the same time, I — I just don't know how long she's gonna want to do that. And — and it's — it's like — it's like with Elon when he took over Twitter and turned it into X, every single time —

DARCY: I got to stop you. I think — I think that she will relish and attack from Donald Trump because she can say, look, we're hard on Donald Trump and they'll do the thing where they say, well, Bari's attacked by the left, she's attacked by the right. That means she must be doing a good thing, as if that, like, is a good barometer for doing the right thing. I think Donald Trump attacking Bari Weiss will be the best thing for her. And I'm sure he will at some point because they'll publish something on 60 Minutes or whatever, and he'll — he'll lash out or whatever. But that does not mean that she's actually, like, aggressive critic of Donald Trump although that is certainly how they will portray it.

PASSANTINO: No, because then certainly then Trump is gonna go after Ellison, and then Ellison is gonna be in this position that he doesn't want to be in, which is, oh boy, now we've poked the bear and we are friendly with the bear and we need him to, let's say, approve our next

deal with Warner Bros. Discovery and then you have this pressure back on Bari who wants to go out there and say, oh no, no, no, both sides are pissed off at me. Again —

DARCY: I think — no.

PASSANTINO: — the connection to Trump is —

DARCY: But, wait, it's — it's going to run — there is already a playbook for this. It's gonna run exactly like Murdoch's and Fox News, and they — Fox News, I think, probably enjoys when occasionally Donald Trump voices a discontent to their — you know, for their coverage because they can say like, you know, we're — we're not going to be deterred and Rupert Murdoch is still being invited to fancy dinners, state dinners, and even though Donald Trump's suing him, it's a very weird dance, but I'm not convinced that that's going to really jeopardize the Ellison deals. And I — I — I think — I actually think the best thing that will happen to Bari is the first time Donald Trump voices discontent because they will use that in saying, look, all you critics said that we're going to be easy on Trump and look, he's attacking us, and that means that we're not and same — it doesn't mean that that you're clear-eyed. It doesn't mean that your coverage is strong in any particular way when it comes to covering the administration, it just means the President has thin skin, but it gets, it gets portrayed differently. Mark my words, Jon.

PASSANTINO: We — we will — we will see. I — I actually don't even know if this — this Bari era at CBS is — is for long. I give it a year, year and a half, but anything can happen.