

US sexual witch-hunt

NBC's "Today" co-anchor Matt Lauer and "Prairie Home Companion" creator Garrison Keillor latest to be purged

By David Walsh
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The purge of the US entertainment, media and political world initiated in early October by the *New York Times* has chalked up two more victims. The spinelessness and contempt for democracy in these circles seems almost universal and unlimited.

NBC News announced Wednesday it had axed Matt Lauer, longtime co-anchor of its "Today" show, after receiving a complaint on Monday night about his alleged sexual impropriety.

Later on Wednesday, Minnesota Public Radio (MPR) announced the firing of Garrison Keillor, former host and creator of "A Prairie Home Companion," a staple of public radio for decades. Keillor retired from the program in 2016, but MPR continued to distribute and broadcast his "The Writer's Almanac" and rebroadcast "The Best of A Prairie Home Companion" hosted by Garrison Keillor.

The speed and brutality of Lauer's dismissal, in particular, was breathtaking. The "Today" anchor, who had hosted the program since 1997 and appeared on it as usual Tuesday morning, was apparently discharged Tuesday night. NBC made its public announcement Wednesday morning.

The startling action reportedly occurred following a complaint made by a female NBC staffer about Lauer's behavior during the Sochi Winter Olympics in 2014.

An unnamed informant cited by the *New York Post's* "Page Six" gossip section explained, "This happened so quickly. She [the accuser] didn't go to the media, she made a complaint to NBC's human resources, and her evidence was so compelling that Matt was fired on Tuesday night. The victim says she has evidence that this has also happened to other women, but so far we don't have evidence of that."

NBC News chief Andrew Lack issued a statement that read in part: "On Monday night, we received a detailed complaint from a colleague about inappropriate sexual behavior in the workplace by Matt Lauer. It represented, after serious review, a clear violation of our company's standards. As a result, we've

decided to terminate his employment."

Lack went on, "While it is the first complaint about his behavior in the over twenty years he's been at NBC News, we were also presented with reason to believe this may not have been an isolated incident."

How much of a "serious review" could NBC have conducted in the space of a few hours on Tuesday? The network was "presented with reason to believe," nothing more, that it might not have been an isolated incident!

Lauer, who was earning \$29 million a year according to media reports and was a prominent public figure, is gone on the basis of one allegation of "inappropriate sexual behavior." He has effectively been "disappeared" within the course of 36 hours. Since NBC has not named the alleged victim, Lauer has been forced out, as far as the general public is concerned, on the basis of anonymous, behind-closed-doors accusations.

Wednesday morning, Lauer's former "Today" co-host Savannah Guthrie, obviously shaken, told viewers that she had just learned of the firing moments earlier. Guthrie and co-host Hoda Kotb, in other words, had neither been informed of the move nor asked about their own experiences with Lauer.

Guthrie commented, "This is a sad morning at 'Today' and NBC News. ... As I'm sure you can understand, we are devastated. I'm heartbroken for Matt. He is my dear, dear friend and partner."

But she went on, undismayed by the fact that Lauer had been fired on the basis of allegations. "We are grappling with a dilemma that so many people have faced these weeks. How do you reconcile your love for someone with the recognition that they have behaved badly? And I don't know the answer to that."

Kotb said she had known Lauer for years and "loved him as a friend and a colleague." She continued, "It's hard to reconcile the man who walks in every day with the individual mentioned in the complaint."

The Lauer firing immediately prompted a flurry of scurrilous

articles in the media, purporting to prove that the NBC anchor was a reprobate of long-standing, deserving of the most severe punishment. *Variety*, on the basis of “a two-month investigation ... with dozens of interviews with current and former staffers,” published a lurid and supposedly damning article on Wednesday afternoon, which was remarkably short on substance. It cited anonymous comments by “three women who identified themselves as victims of sexual harassment by Lauer,” but who “have asked for now to remain unnamed, fearing professional repercussions.” The only one suffering professional repercussions to this point has been Lauer.

Nevertheless, Martha Ross headlined her piece in the *Mercury News* on the *Variety* investigation, “Disturbing, multiple allegations of sexual misconduct against newsman detailed in stunning new report.” Ross was responsible for another piece on Wednesday whose headline took shocked note of the fact that Lauer was “Long rumored to be a ‘womanizer,’” as though such behavior were criminal.

We have no sympathy for Lauer’s conventional and essentially right-wing views, but the precedent that is being set in these cases is threatening and sinister. On the basis of unproven, quasi-anonymous allegations, figures are simply vanishing from the political and cultural landscape, with no apparent recourse, no protests and no end to the process in sight. If this is how the powers that be settle scores with one of their own, one of the most highly paid individuals in the American media, what will they be prepared to do in the case of genuine political opponents, of socialists?

The case against Keillor, 75, seems even more preposterous.

The statement by Minnesota Public Radio President Jon McTaggart announcing that the organization was severing all ties with Keillor reeked of hypocrisy and cowardice. The latter was discharged, according to McTaggart, over “allegations of his inappropriate behavior with an individual who worked with him.” Keillor had been “an important part of the growth and success of MPR, and all of us in the MPR community are saddened by these circumstances,” the statement read.

“While we appreciate the contributions Garrison has made to MPR and to all of public radio, we believe this decision is the right thing to do and is necessary to continue to earn the trust of our audiences, employees and supporters of our public service,” McTaggart miserably went on.

In keeping with what has become standard practice in such cases, MPR has not only fired Keillor, it has immediately sought to purge all traces of his decades-long association with the broadcaster. MPR said in its statement that the station and its owner, American Public Media, would no longer distribute “Writer’s Almanac” and would stop rebroadcasting “The Best Of A Prairie Home Companion.” In addition, new episodes of “A Prairie Home Companion” will be given a new name.

In an email to the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* newspaper, Keillor observed, “Getting fired is a real distinction in broadcasting and I’ve waited fifty years for the honor. All of

my heroes got fired. I only wish it could’ve been for something more heroic.”

He explained that he had put his hand “on a woman’s bare back” in an effort to console her. “I meant to pat her back after she told me about her unhappiness and her shirt was open and my hand went up it about six inches. She recoiled. I apologized. I sent her an email of apology later and she replied that she had forgiven me and not to think about it. We were friends. We continued to be friendly right up until her lawyer called.”

Keillor’s email continued, “Anyone who ever was around my show can tell you that I was the least physically affectionate person in the building. Actors hug, musicians hug, people were embracing every Saturday night left and right, and I stood off in the corner like a stone statue. If I had a dollar for every woman who asked to take a selfie with me and who slipped an arm around me and let it drift down below the beltline, I’d have at least a hundred dollars. So this is poetic irony of a high order.”

The firing took place the same day the *Washington Post* ran an article by Keillor ridiculing the controversy surrounding Minnesota’s Democratic senator Al Franken, accused by former *Playboy* model Leeann Tweeden of kissing her during a USO tour to the Middle East and later posing in a suggestive photograph while she slept.

Keillor took note in the *Post* of the character of the “broad comedy” used to entertain US troops. “Miss Tweeden knew what the game was,” Keillor continued, “and played her role and on the flight home, in a spirit of low comedy, Al ogled her and pretended to grab her and a picture was taken. Eleven years later, a talk show host in L.A., she goes public with her embarrassment, and there is talk of resignation. This is pure absurdity and the atrocity it leads to is a code of public deadliness. No kidding.”

With the toll of disgraced and disappeared mounting daily, one can only wonder, who’s next?

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