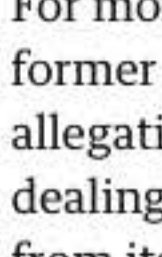




NBC 'Toxic culture': NBC faces new challenges amid storms of #MeToo era

Gabrielle Union claims racially insensitive behavior forced her out of America's Got Talent - a new blow for the network



Lucia Graves

@lucia_graves

Sun 8 Dec 2019 09:36 EST

One of America's most powerful TV networks is in hot water again.

For months NBC News has been trying to rebut reports that it suppressed former correspondent Ronan Farrow's investigation into sexual assault allegations against Harvey Weinstein. Its parent network, **NBC**, has also been dealing with the fallout from allegations of sexual abuse and harassment from its once top presenter Matt Lauer.

Catch and Kill by Ronan Farrow review - how the great white predators stick together

→ Read more

Now NBC - which presides over America's top-rated nightly newscast, as well as the longest-running television news series - faces a new public relations headache.

NBC has faced a storm of criticism following reports that it fired the African American presenter Gabrielle Union after she spoke out about racially insensitive behavior and other problems on the set of the hit show America's Got Talent. The prominent women's advocacy group Time's Up has denounced NBC's handling of Union, telling the Guardian it fits a "pattern of the network protecting the careers of powerful men at the expense of women who speak out".

This week Time's Up launched a petition encouraging signatories to demand the network "[address its toxic workplace culture, once and for all](#)".

That is a big ask. The Union affair illustrates the media giant's ongoing struggles with the #MeToo era as one of the most storied names in American broadcasting has lurched from crisis to crisis and endured widespread criticism from across the industry - and even from some of its own biggest media names.

Hollywood has firmly rallied to Union's side, with pop star Ariana Grande and actor Kerry Washington, among others, expressing support. The petition was [tweeted out approvingly](#) by actor and director Elizabeth Banks. The biggest actors' union in the country - [along with NBC itself](#) - is now [investigating what occurred](#) during Union's one-season stint on the show.



Sign up to the Media Briefing: news for the news-makers

→ Read more

"Not only did Union reportedly endure and witness racist and inappropriate behavior - including racially insensitive comments and excessive criticism about her physical appearance," Tina Tchen, the chief executive of Time's Up, said in a statement to the Guardian, "but it also appears she was punished for speaking out: The company labeled her as 'difficult' before ousting her from the show altogether."

The story began quietly enough. On 22 November, [news broke](#) that Union and fellow judge Julianne Hough were leaving America's Got Talent - the talent contest show helmed by Simon Cowell - after a single season.

But Variety, the entertainment industry trade publication, [subsequently reported](#) that Union, who is black, had been dismissed following a number of racially charged incidents. They included a time she expressed concern about a joke made by guest Jay Leno that alluded to Koreans eating dog meat (it was removed from the show before it aired), and Union repeatedly being told her hair was "too black" for the show.

Another [report from Vulture](#) flagged Union's frustrations after producers allegedly discouraged judges from supporting a young black rapper on the grounds that they needed to choose an act "that America can get behind".

Hough, the other AGT judge leaving this season, said she had a "[wonderful time](#)" on the show.

NBC and Fremantle, the show's production company, responded in a statement at the time saying, "America's Got Talent has a long history of inclusivity and diversity in both our talent and the acts championed by the show. The judging and host line-up has been regularly refreshed over the years and that is one of the reasons for AGT's enduring popularity."

This week NBC and Fremantle met with Union for a five-hour "fact-finding meeting". Both parties deemed that first conversation "productive", and the network has announced its intention to launch a deeper investigation into the reported incidents.

NBC said in a statement that the "initial conversation was candid and productive. While there will be a further investigation to get a deeper understanding of the facts, we are working with Gabrielle to come to a positive resolution." And Union tweeted approvingly that "I was able to, again, express my unfiltered truth."

That NBC is taking her complaints so seriously is a belated sign that the network has realised the impact of the repeated scandals and a testament, perhaps, to the power of whistleblowers.

That's according to Farrow in an appearance this week on The View, a popular daytime show on rival network ABC.



▲ Ronan Farrow: 'I think we're seeing the consequences of what happens when you sweep these kinds of problems under the rug.' Photograph: Ken McKay/ITV/Rex/Shutterstock

"It is very clear that source after source is saying there is a systemic cultural problem with this kind of toxicity at NBC," Farrow said. "I think we're seeing the consequences of what happens when you sweep these kinds of problems under the rug."

They are consequences Farrow would know something about.

In his bestselling *Catch and Kill*, Farrow alleged that disgraced mogul Weinstein worked every connection he had at the network to achieve his desired effect: NBC ordered a stop to Farrow's reporting.

What's more, Farrow states specifically that NBC attempted to suppress his reporting after Weinstein threatened to reveal sexual misconduct allegations against the network's former star host, Lauer.

NBC has repeatedly denied attempting to stop Farrow's reporting, arguing the allegations put forth in his book "paint a fundamentally untrue picture".

"We have no secrets and nothing to hide," the NBC News president, Noah Oppenheim, [told staffers in an October memo](#). "There is no evidence of any reports of Lauer's misconduct before his firing, no settlements, no 'hush money'."

But Farrow has some very public supporters at the network.

Chris Hayes a host on MSNBC, NBC's cable network, has used his own airtime to support Farrow's reporting and express his consternation at how his employer had handled Farrow's early work on Weinstein. **Rachel Maddow** has also addressed the issue on her own show, calling for an independent investigation of the network's conduct.

But in [another memo to staff sent around that time](#), the NBC News chairman, Andy Lack, sounded notes similar to Oppenheim's rebuttal.

"After seven months, without one victim or witness on the record, he simply didn't have a story that met our standard for broadcast nor that of any major news organization. Not willing to accept that standard and not wanting to get beaten by the New York Times, he asked to take his story to an outlet he claimed was ready to publish right away. Reluctantly, we allowed him to go ahead."

Less than two months later Farrow published a Pulitzer prize-winning story in the *New Yorker* that Lack in his memo said "bore little resemblance to the reporting he had while at NBC News".



▲ NBC's Matt Lauer in Sochi. Photograph: Scott Halleran/Getty Images

In his book, Farrow had reported former NBC news employee Brooke Nevils' allegation that Lauer had anally raped her at the Sochi Olympics. And Lack, in his memo, also contested the notion that NBC had ever been aware of complaints about Lauer's conduct prior to Nevils' allegation. The NBC legal team's "exhaustive investigation" of records and interviews of staff had "uncovered no claims or settlements associated with allegations of inappropriate conduct by Lauer before he was fired," he wrote

Lauer, who would go on to be fired in 2017 following multiple sexual misconduct allegations, confirmed he had a relationship with the woman in question but maintains it was "completely consensual" and [vehemently denies](#) all allegations of rape and coercive conduct as "categorically false".

But Farrow asserts that in fact the network paid out multiple settlement agreements to Lauer's accusers in the years leading up to the complaint.

Nor is he alone.

In interviews last year, a dozen current and former NBC staffers [told the Washington Post](#) they had been sexually harassed while working at NBC but chose not to report it, and three women said they had been harassed by Lauer specifically.

Lauer responded: "I fully acknowledge that I acted inappropriately as a husband, father and principal at NBC. However, I want to make it perfectly clear that any allegations or reports of coercive, aggressive or abusive actions on my part, at any time, are absolutely false."

Even before revelations about Lauer and Weinstein became public, NBC was already facing scrutiny for [failing to run](#) the Access Hollywood tape in which Donald Trump brags about sexually assaulting women. The tape was later leaked to the Washington Post, whose reporter went on to win a Pulitzer prize.

That NBC will have an [independent investigator](#) look into the latest dust-up with Union shows they are perhaps taking these issues more seriously.

But after the meeting this week with Union, her lawyer Bryan Freedman said he was still "waiting to see the next steps on whether NBC is going to make sure that there are real changes" afoot.

Contacted Friday afternoon by the Guardian, he added his team had "nothing to update at this time."