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The Chris Cuomo Saga At CNN Just Got A Lot Messier

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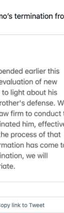
Both CNN and now ex-anchor Chris Cuomo have reportedly lawyered up following the network abruptly ... [+] GETTY IMAGES FOR SiriusXM

For CNN, the headaches surrounding events leading up to and including the firing over the weekend of star anchor Chris Cuomo don't look to be dissipating anytime soon. If anything, the whole affair looks like it's about to get a lot messier — and even more problematic for the network.

Just days after Cuomo's firing this weekend over a sexual misconduct allegation — which came to light amid a release of new records from the New York attorney general's office, as well as of a report from the law firm Cravath Swaine & Moore — the now ex-anchor was trying to drag CNN president Jeff Zucker into the fray. A Cuomo spokesman insisted to *The Wall Street Journal* that Zucker was aware of what Cuomo had been doing behind the scenes earlier this year, in terms of informally advising his brother, former New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, during the latter's own sexual harassment scandal.

That's before new information, however, came to light over the past week. Which took what previously had been merely an eyebrow-raising blurring of journalistic lines on Cuomo's part, and added two compounding factors. One, that it seems Cuomo was much more involved with helping his brother navigate the earlier scandal than the network apparently realized at the time. And, two, an unrelated sexual misconduct claim against the younger Cuomo was also now added to the mix.

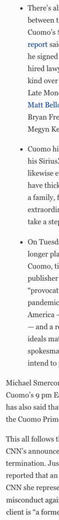


Former New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, left, and now ex-CNN anchor Chris Cuomo, GETTY IMAGES FOR TRIBECA FILM FESTIVAL

Nevertheless, the anchor's statement pointed a finger at CNN's Zucker: "Mr. Cuomo has the highest level of admiration and respect for Mr. Zucker," reads the statement from Cuomo's spokesman. "They were widely known to be extremely close and in regular contact, including about the details of Mr. Cuomo's support for his brother. There were no secrets about this, as other individuals besides Mr. Cuomo can attest."

CNN, for its part, spent Sunday and Monday working to knock down the implication in that statement — that he had Zucker's imprimatur or some sort of cover for any of this. One CNN source described that claim to me as, in a word, "bogus."

"We are disappointed with Chris's statement," reads the network's official response. "He has made a number of accusations that are patently false. This reinforces why he was terminated for violating our standards and practices, as well as for his lack of candor."



Meantime, the cascading fallout from Cuomo's firing continues to mount. And it includes:

- Now saddling CNN with the task of figuring out what to do with this newly created, very prominent hole in the network's primetime lineup. And at a time when CNN's ratings have taken a considerable hit this year compared to 2020.
- There's also the possibility of a legal showdown between the anchor and the network over Cuomo's $6 million annual contract, which one report said centers around a four-year deal that he signed last year. Cuomo has reportedly already hired lawyers in anticipation of an action of some kind over extracting a payment from the network. Late Monday, Puck News' well-sourced journalist Matt Belloni reported that Cuomo has hired Bryan Freedman, the litigator who handled Megyn Kelly's exit from NBC.
- Cuomo himself, on Monday, also announced that his SiriusXM radio show "Let's Get After It" is likewise ending, in light of these events. "While I have thick skin," he wrote in a tweet, "I also have a family, for whom the past week has been extraordinarily difficult. So, right now, I have to take a step back and focus on what comes next."
- On Tuesday, HarperCollins confirmed that it's no longer planning to publish a book authored by Cuomo, titled "Deep Denial." According to the publisher description, this was to have been a "provocative analysis of the harsh truths that the pandemic and Trump years have exposed about America — about our strength and our character — and a roadmap of the work needed to make our ideals match reality." Said a HarperCollins spokesman to The New York Times: "We do not intend to publish the Cuomo book."

Michael Smerconish is filling in, for now, during Cuomo's 9 pm Eastern time slot this week. The network has also said that producers and staffers who work on the Cuomo Prime Time show will remain in place.

This all follows the swift series of events in the wake of CNN's announcement on Saturday, heralding Cuomo's termination. Just hours after that, The New York Times reported that an attorney, Debra Katz, had informed CNN she represents a client with an allegation of sexual misconduct against Cuomo. The Times has reported that client is "a former junior colleague (of Cuomo's) at another network," which is to say, not CNN.

Through a spokesman, Cuomo's response to the newspaper is that "these apparently anonymous allegations are not true."

Cuomo attracted considerable scrutiny in journalism circles last year, when he brought his brother onto his show for a number of softball, fawning "interviews." Not that there was much or really any rigorous interviewing taking place.

During one appearance on the younger Cuomo's CNN show in April of 2020, for example, he threw the then-governor questions designed to elicit answers like: "I've always been a soft guy. I am the 'Love Gov.' I'm a cool dude in a loose mood." Later during that same segment, the brothers shared some laughs about an old family photo. "Governor, it's good to remind people that they're just coming to love you now as much as I have my whole life," the younger Cuomo told the governor.

During one of his shows in August, Cuomo at one point told his audience: "I can't be objective when it comes to my family, so I never reported on the scandal. And when it happened, I tried to be there for my brother. I'm not an adviser. I'm a brother. I wasn't in control of anything. I was there to listen and offer my take. And my advice to my brother was simple and consistent. Own what you did. Tell people what you'll do to be better. Be contrite. And finally, accept that it doesn't matter what you intended. What matters is how your actions and words were perceived."

The Poynter journalism organization on Monday published a blistering response to the Cuomo saga, attributing the anchor's fall, as well as his brother's, to "arrogance." To "the entitled belief that the rules don't necessarily apply to them, the misguided assumption that just because they do good in some parts of their jobs means they can be excused for ill-behavior in other parts."